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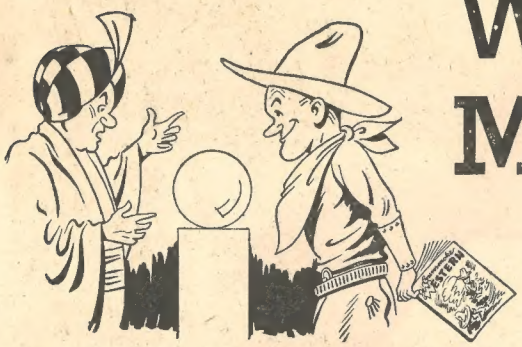

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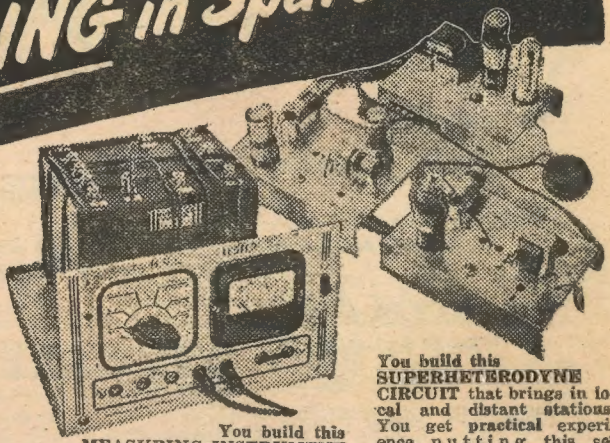

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SPEED WESTERN STORIES

January, 1947 Vol. 7, No. 1

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How the Rodeos Started

MOST everyone likes a rodeo: it gives the spectator a thrill to watch the cowboy or cowgirl as he or she sits astride a pony while it pitches, rears, sunfishes or hits the high spots in a burst of speed.

However, very few who attend the rodeos have ever given any thought to how they started or what brought them down to us today from those early days of the great Western ranches, with their herds numbering well into the thousands, tended by perhaps a score of hard-riding, rip-roaring cowboys.

In 1888 there was a cowboy contest held at Prescott, Arizona, with prizes offered for the winners. This was, according to reliable authority, the first contest entered into by cowboys for prizes, and is considered the beginning of the rodeo as we know it today.

On the famous old Goodnight Ranch, at Goodnight, Texas, many contests consisting of roping, broncho riding, bulldogging and fancy rope-twirling were held in the early days between the Goodnight riders and riders from other ranches. These contests were competed in by the best riders and ropers from the different ranches, and led to considerable rivalry. The sport was indulged in because the cowboys needed a way to let off surplus energy; and since they were doing only what every expert cowboy learned to do in his daily life on the range, the winners were often closely followed by other riders.

ROPING is a very important part of the cowboy's work, especially at the roundup and branding time. It looks easy the way the top-notchers do it, but do not be deceived. It takes a lot of practice to be able to throw a lasso over the head of a running animal, while sitting on the back of a fleeing saddle pony. A well-trained pony is also a very necessary part of the cowboy's equipment if he is to snare a prize along with an animal.

Riding is an art that is not acquired in a day. It takes much practice to enable one to stay with an unruly mount, as well as to stand the strain of many hours in a saddle, riding hither and yon after straggling cow critters. Cowboys often had as many as six ponies in their *remuda* and during a hard day's riding on a roundup might tire out the entire six.

In the early days in the great Southwest the cattle were often trail-herded for hundreds of miles, feeding as they went, to be fat when they reached the railroad to be shipped to market. Naturally the cowboys who went with these trail herds became expert riders and ropers. Cattle were driven from south Texas to Dodge City or other Kansas towns, where they were loaded and shipped to market.—*Ward Skeen*

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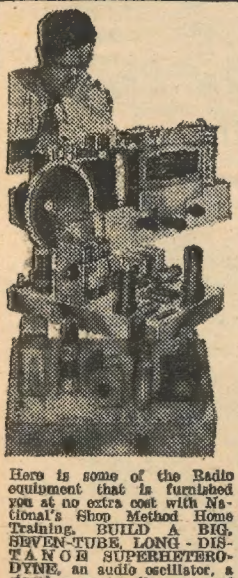

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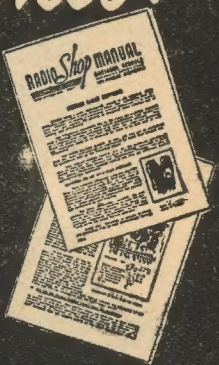

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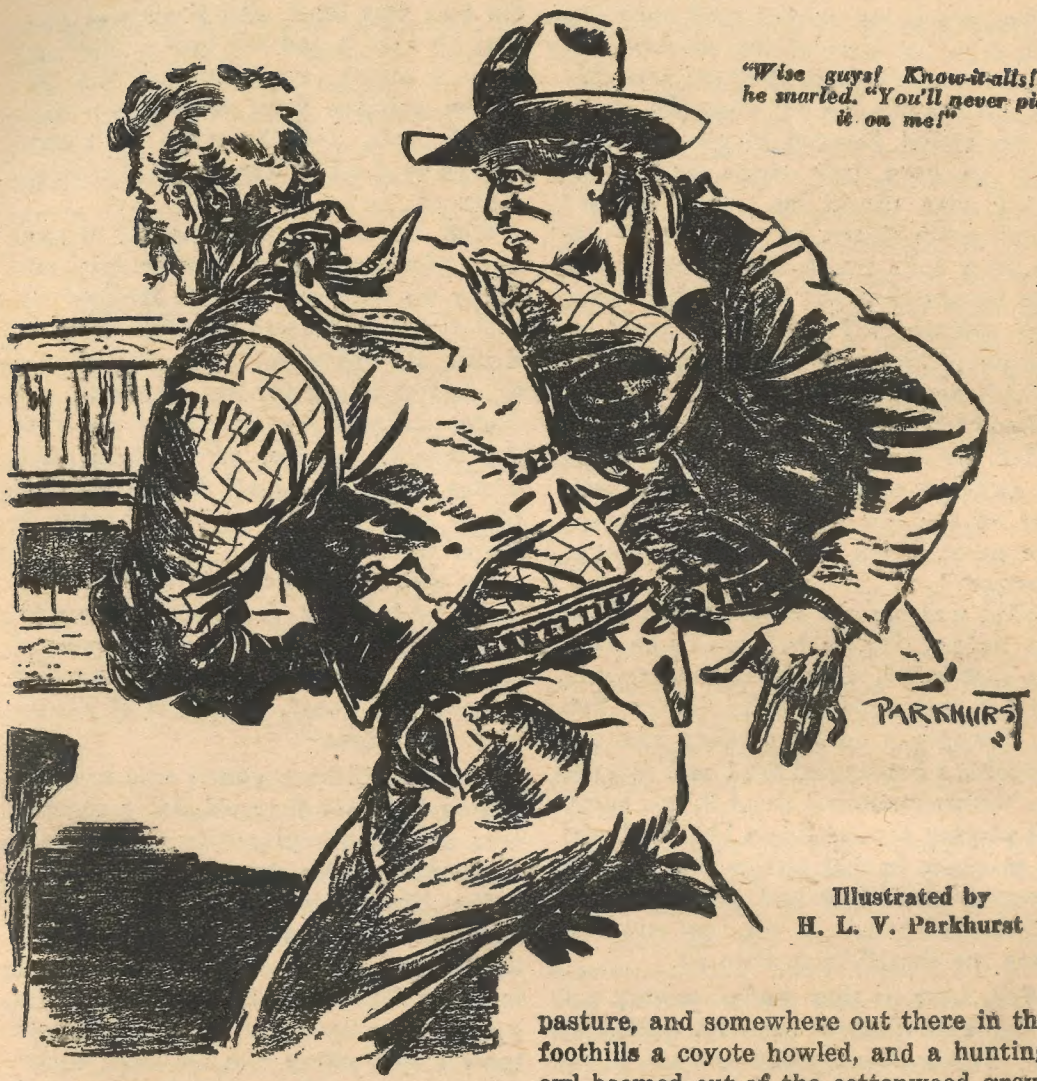
"Me, I'm Jerry Stone," he said, as if he meant it. But, I, I doubted it a great deal. And yet I liked the button. He had guts. And so I took him under my wing, wondering what it all meant. Who was I to ask questions?

NO MATTER WHAT anybody tells you, I am not a hidebound old reprobate living in the past. I am not an onery old leather-skinned polecat that thinks anything made after 1900 is worthless. That is just what Powder River Curly told Yakima Tony and Gila Pete when he was sore on account of I laughed at his fancy rodeo rig on a Texas saddle. But it ain't worth arguing about.

So every evening, after Ling, our Chinese cook that went to Harvard, has finished serving us with a six course dinner instead of good old sow belly and beans, I walk down to the near corner of the east pasture and talk to Baldy some.

Baldy is my horse. I been having

By GEORGE HARMON



"Wise guys! Know-it-alls!" he snarled. "You'll never pin it on me!"

Illustrated by
H. L. V. Parkhurst

Baldy twenty-four year now, and a lot of these movie cowboys around this dude ranch laugh at him. All right, he's a little piebald with age, but that horse has got savvy, he's got plenty of savvy.

We get long twilights out here. The Matadors off to the west was turning from purple to grey this night, and the red over them was fading darker, if that makes sense, and the breeze was coming up over the sage in the east pasture, and somewhere out there in the foothills a coyote howled, and a hunting owl boomed out of the cottonwood grove down by the windmills.

I wrapped me up a cigarette—I don't hold with ready rolls—and I said to Baldy, "By heavens, Baldy, if it hadn't been for me promising Shanghai I'd stick on, I'd pack my Twenty Years A-gatherin' and go over the hill. These here dudes is more than I can stand! Bankers from Boston and lawyers from Lynn and doctors from Dover, to say nothing of the women!"

GUNS TO SLING

The breeze she twisted a bit then like it does in our part of the country, and I could hear the trio, Yakima and Gila and Powder River, serenading the guests in the patio! Danged movie cowboys! With no good hair chaps and nickel plated guns they'd be scared to use! Damn' rodeo riders, all of them! Working on a dude ranch that used to produce twenty thousand head of beef—but what was the use? I was so wrapped up in sadness like a *Mexicano* poncho that I didn't hear this fellow.

Somebody said, "You Sheriff Lucas?"

Hell, he could have seen the star on my calfskin vest. I grunted and said, "I'm all the law there is around these here parts. What might be your name, stranger?"

What was the use a-telling him about that badge? See, it happened like this, way back in '96, when I was a flat twenty and had just come to Yellow River. You see I caught a couple of Mex rustlers, and being a hot-headed kid I sort of hung 'em. Nothing personal about it, you know, just playing around like a kid. Well, sir, the ranchers in that section liked it, and somebody sent East and got me a star and they pinned it on my vest and said I was the sheriff from then on.

Well, later on they made a county out of the Yellow River country, calling it that, Yellow River County. Only thing was there wa'n't any towns in the county at all—and there ain't yet. We don't have no elections like, but I reckon through habit I just kept on being sheriff year after year. Sort of a sheriff with no jurisdiction.

He spat, and he said, "Name might be anything. I asked you a question!"

SO I TURNED and looked at him. He was as tall as I'd been at his age, which might have been around thirty, and he was straight as a string and wide, plenty wide at the shoulders. He wore a good Stetson pushed back on a high forehead, and his nose was like a hawk's beak, and his eyes damn' near as black and flashing.

He was tired, you could see that, and his face was lined, and there was grey dust all over it and the brown shirt and pants to match he was wearing. The legs of the britches were tucked into high heeled boots, and the pants fit tightly enough to show he was bow legged as me —almost.

Well, sir, we sat there glaring at each other like a couple of strange cats, and finally we both grinned. He laughed out loud and said, "It was a foolish question, wasn't it? They told me over at the Circle Dot to ask for Sheriff Lucas, and you're wearing a star, so you must be the sheriff. Me, I'm Jerry Stone, and, mister, I got to admit driving a Ford jalopy over these west Texas roads is pretty tiresome!"

He sighed and took out a sack to tobaccy and began fashioning a smoke. Now I'm no fool. Them bowlegs spoke of riding. He twisted a cigarette instead of thumbing it. I said, "Been out of Mexico long, Mr. Stone?"

Reckon he'd have gotten sore and suspicious but just then old Baldy reached over the fence and nuzzled that smoke right out of his hand. Ain't nothing Baldy likes better than the makin's. And Stone laughed and cussed him gentle-like and scratched his ears, and all in all he didn't answer my question, and we got to talking and the first thing I knew I was telling him all about everything, how old Shanghai Brennan had finally died with his boots on and left the Beebox to his granddaughter, Bette, and how she'd made it into a dude ranch and sold off most of the cattle, and hired a lot of phony cowboys and a few Indians for atmosphere.

"I know how you feel, old-timer," he said, gazing off toward the Matadors sort of wistful like. "You and me look at it the same. These cowboys and all this fake atmosphere, roughing it with private baths and all that's phony, plumb phony. And that's something I can't stand!"

I nodded. And just then the god-awfullest whoop and holler you ever heard like to have lifted our hats. Now from where we was loafing you could see the back door of the bunkhouse. Well

sir, that back door came open with a bang and out shot a blanketed Indian with a couple of eagle feathers in his hair, and his red blanket streaming out behind,what with him going so fast. And right behim him, jabbering in heathen came a Chinaman, waving a cleaver and trying to scalp the Indian.

I said, "There's progress for you. That Chink's name is Ling. He's the cook, and he graduated from Harvard University two years ago. He's working out here while he gathers material for some sort of paper on old fossils. The Indian is Charlie Goodmorning. He looks like Sitting Bull on the warpath, but by damn, he went to a university too, and he's got papers to show it."

By that time the whoops had died away and the Chink and the Indian had done disappeared. This feller, Stone, he said, "Why the act? Is that chase just to impress the dudes? I don't see none around."

"Naw," I told him, "that Charlie Goodmorning is one of them candid camera fiends. He is a nuisance and a menace. He takes pictures of guys in the damnedest predicaments. He probably used one of them flash bulbs and caught Ling with his britches down or something—"

"Uncle Tim! Why be so vulgar?"

Yeah, it was Bette. She'd come up while we was talking. She said, "I saw that terrible looking Ford out in the barnyard and wondered."

BETTE is twenty-four, and most of the time looks eighteen. This was one of those times. See, the Beebox is a vacation ranch, and most everybody wears what they call sport clothes. Me, that's what I call them too, but I don't mean the same thing. I mean the kind of sports me and Shanghai knew back in El Paso and San Antone in the 90s. Bette, for example, she's some shucks as a woman, looking like one of them there movie stars. And whenever I get on her about her lack of clothes she just says it pays to advertise, and that at least a dozen paying guests spend their vacations at the Beebox on account of that lack.

So there she stood in the twilight, wearing a little pair of loose fitting white shorts that accented the curved brownness of her derned knees and calves, and a thin, white silk sweater that didn't leave much to the imagination. Bette is a right pretty gal, favoring her ma, who was a real beauty, with grey eyes and corn-colored hair, and a good chin, like her grandpa's. Maybe her mouth is a bit large but it's full of damned white even teeth and it's more than a pleasure to watch her smile and talk.

I heard a gasp beside me, and turning, saw Jerry Stone with his mouth wide open and his eyes sort of humblelike as he ate Bette up with them. She affects men that way, our Bette does. And in a minute he caught hisself, and fumbled his Stetson from his head, and dropped it like a big awkward kid and stepped on it, never knowing he was doing it! He said, "I—I—that is to say—I—the Ford's mine and I—"

All the time he was advancing past me and his eyes was burning on Bette and he had both his hands out to touch her, and she got red in the face and started backing away from him. So I laid a hand on his arm and it sort of woke him up. That amazed and humble look didn't die out of his eyes though. It was easy to see what was wrong. That feller, Stone, had never even let himself believe there was such a woman as Bette Brennan! That ranny was in love! I looked for him to shake his head and start pawing the ground and neighing like a stallion anytime.

But he blurted out, "I'm Jeremy Stone, ma'am, come to see Sheriff Lucas on business, and if you'll let me stick around a few days I'll—"

Now women are hell. What she wanted to pop the whip on him for I don't know. She drew herself up and said in dern few words that the Beebox was a guest ranch, with a lot of emphasis on *guest*.

I got sore. In my day the West showed a lot more hospitality and got no dinero for doing it. I said, "Shut up, Bette.

Jerry forgot to explain that he's a sort of nephew of mine. He'll bunk in with me, d'you understand?"

So what could she say? She just nodded sort of absently and stared out across the pasture, biting her lower lip. And Stone, he kept right on staring at *her* and a breathing hard through his nose.

Here came footsteps, here came a voice I'd grown to despise, saying, "Bette? Are you there? Been looking for you, Bette."

IT WAS a gent named Wally Masters, that had been duding around the Beebox for the past month, and the guy seemed to have the inner track with Bette, by golly. I never had nothing definite against him and his ways except he was too danged pretty. One of those fellows with every curly hair in place and a little mustache, and a way of leaning close to a woman and whispering sweet nothings into her ear. His auntie was with him, and I wish you could have seen her. But I'll get to that in a minute.

Bette went right with Masters, and they laughed for a minute and moved off, so close together that her hip was almost touching his, and his fingers was in the soft flesh of her upper arm. I grunted and turned to Stone, and damn me, he wasn't there! I called, "Hey, Stone," and he came out of the shadow of an organ cactus, and his eyes was

Jerry's mouth was open and his eyes were humblelike as he ate Bette up with them.

glowing and he had his hand inside his shirt.

Sort of hoarse like he said, "Who was that?"

I told him and if ever I see a guy ready to do murder or ready to run like hell, I couldn't tell which, it was this guy Stone. He was shaking all over, and I could actually see the gun beneath his shirt now. I was worried. I said, "Look-it, Stone, I don't know you from Adam. I'm an old timer, and in my day if we liked a ranny's looks we didn't ask where he come from or where he was going. I told Miss Bette you was my nephew because I liked you."

He relaxed after a while and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Thanks, old timer," he said through his teeth, "I get you. In other words you don't want no trouble for Miss Bette." I nodded. "Sorry I acted like that. You see, matter of fact, I'm looking around for a couple of people I've never really seen. This fellow reminds me of one of them." He wrapped hisself another smoke, twisting it like,

and said, "He's—he's—I mean she's sort of soft on him?"

I nodded, grimly, and I said, "Sure is. She thinks he's swell. He likes, her, too, only his auntie raises hell and—"

Speak of the devil! There was Auntie. Auntie's name was Gwen Parsons. Leastwise after she'd known a man—any man—all of five minutes, she had a way of rolling her calf's eyes up at him and saying, "Just call me Gwen!"

I'm not so good at female age guessing, and Gwen's age could have been anything from thirty to fifty. I see me a movie once in El Paso with this here Mae West in it, and Gwen was like her, only more so. You know, one of them hourglass figures she liked to show at the drop of a hat, her dropping the hat herself, and a come-hither swing to her hips, and a meaning inflection to her voice, and a way of dropping her long lashes over her big blue eyes that made a man wonder just what she meant. You know the kind of dame I mean.

WELL, sir, I mentioned that most everybody wore sport clothes on the Beebox. But not Gwen. Gwen, she dressed for dinner, she said. Us boys—believe it was Yakima that made the crack first—claimed she undressed for dinner.

So here she was, picking up the skirt of her long evening gown so that the faint light gleamed and flickered on her silken leg, that dress cut so low in front and so tight across the hips damned near anything could happen any minute. She came a-swaying up and she laid her hand on my arm and fluttered her eyes and she said, "Isn't it a lovely night and I don't suppose you've seen dear Wally?"

She was heady as a mint bed with scent, smelling like a hotel I used to know in the wide open days on Matamores Street in San Antone. Just having her that close made the perspiration pop out on my head.

I finally managed to tell her it sure was a fine night and that I hadn't seen Wally, both of which statements was a lie. It had been a fine night until she ruined it, and I'd seen Wally. I knew damn' well him and Bette had snuck off among the willows down by Yellow River, like they did every night.

So she went a swaying away and Jerry Stone came out of the bushes sweating just like me. His voice was hard as steel. He said, "Don't tell me, Sheriff, don't tell me. I know. Her name is Gwendolyn Parsons and she's supposed to be a rich widow!" His laugh was harder than his voice. Then he slapped me on the back and shrugged, and said, "Sheriff, that woman has got it, now ain't she?"

And I said, "Jerry, she can say 'pass the salt' in such a way that a ranny can't wait till dark to wait outside her door!"

He nodded and said softly, "And that's an idea." Which same I didn't understand at the time.

ME, I GOT a little adobe shack of my own, well off from the bunkhouse where I batch and sleep. Me and Jerry Stone went down there and I put on a pot of good coffee, with chicory, and warmed up some bread and beans, and we talked. I told him about the old days, when we was running forty thousand head of cattle, and how all of us now was just atmosphere for the damn' dudes.

I recall his saying, "Yeah, times is changed, Sheriff, except in one particular. There still has to be outlaws, don't they?" And he took off his shirt and boots, and I saw then I'd been right about the gun, cause he was wearing it in a shoulder holster and it was a flat automatic with a long target barrel. He saw me looking and patted it, and said again, "Yep, there has to be outlaws, mister, and there there always will be guys after outlaws. If you see what I mean."

And who was I to ask questions?

ME, I'VE been a light sleeper all my life. But even at that this Stone got away from me almost. I heard the creaking of the door. And before I could get clear awake he was gone. And his gun was gone from the chair. I pulled

She was lying there calm and serene—too serene, I thought.

on my britches and boots, and strapped on my own Colt there in the darkness. What had he meant about outlaws? Had I made a mistake in the fellow? The Beebox had a dozen rich guests right now, and the pickings would be good.

Then I was out in the yard cutting through the shadows toward the ranch house. I came around the back, kept low, and went right on peering in every window, figuring if anybody was there they'd have to use a flash, and if it was Stone set on doing a job of burglaring I'd sure see him.

Now, the Beebox guests all live in guest cabins, circling the ranch house, but a lot of money and valuables are left in the office, which is in the ranch house proper. I figured checking everything, including the guest cabins. So around the ranch house I went, pausing at each window, until I came to the front. And there on the screened porch, plainly seen

in the glow of the moonlight, was a man and a woman.

Yeah. It was Bette. Bette and Wally Masters. Although at first you couldn't see where one left off and the other began they was pressed that close together. I mean he was doing a bangup job of kissing her. And when she drew back finally, damn me, he sank down on his knees and put his head against her and began crying! Crying!

Her fingers was in his curly hair, and she said in a choked voice, "It doesn't matter what you've been Wally. It's you I love. Nothing anyone can say or do would change me! Nothing!"

I was sick all over. For she was just like her ma, just like her grandpa, old Shanghai! If you wanted any of that family to like a horse, all you had to do was tell them the horse was crowbait, wasn't worth a damn and ought to be shot. And they was the same way only worse about people. It was plumb easy to see that Wally Masters had Bette hooked, roped and tied, ready for the iron.

Pretty soon he got up and looked noble and kissed her hands and said he'd see her tomorrow. And Bette stood looking after him for a while and went on in the house, and I was so upset I forgot all about Jerry Stone. I waited a minute and trailed Wally. He went into his own cabin and the light went on. Reckon I might have went to bed, except that the light went right off in his cabin almost immediately and the guy came out, and went hoofing over the gravel into his auntie's cottage!

And no sooner had the light came on in that cottage than I saw Jerry Stone. He came out of some brush behind the Masters cottage and went a creeping over to the east side of Gwendolyn's cottage. So I crept on down for an eyeful myself, choosing the north side, and I mean I got an eyeful.

GWEN had been in bed I reckon. The gown she wore was like this stuff that comes around eating gum and hand-rolled cigarettes. She was a sight for sore eyes, now, I tell you. And the fact that she was sore made her prettier than ever. She put her hands on her hips and glared at Wally and she shook all over with anger. She said, "You louse, I thought we was on a vacation and here you go trying to push over every babe you see."

He chucked her under the chin and pulled her down beside him, and said, "Why can't I combine business with pleasure, Gwen? We haven't made a real haul since Yuma. Get wise, get wise. This ranch is worth a lot of dough, and the gal, like you say, is a pushover."

She was still sore, though. She shifted around and put her arm around his neck. Said she, "Wally, there isn't a chance. There's only one way to get to a babe like that, and that's marriage. You're pretty good, and that hearts and flowers weeping act is tops, but the only way you'd ever get this Beebox is to marry it. So forget it!"

So he got sort of a contemplative look in his eye which she didn't see, on account of she was kissing him on the neck. And finally she worked up to his mouth and was kissing him there when the voice floated in to them from the east window.

There was death in that voice, hovering over them, about to strike at them! The voice said, "Hold it, damn you! I'm pointing a gun at you. On second thought, both of you stand up, careful like. And stand up slow."

I mean they stood up—slow. The woman standing there in that cellyfane gown, and Wally with his hands half raised, his face the color of a snake's belly. The voice went on, flat and deadly. "I heard you mention that Yuma job. That was young Stone, wasn't it? Young Stone that just got a rap in the pen for robbing the bank where he worked—on account of you, on account of the precious pair of you!"

Wally Masters said, "No! No! You got everything all wrong!" He sort of staggered back against the dresser, as if frightened to death, and the voice said, "Easy does it!" He froze.

"I haven't got anything wrong! I

know! The kid's in the pen, his wife couldn't face it, she committed suicide. Now I'm going to shoot you both, damn you. I'll shoot you and toss the gun in the room, and they'll think it's—hell, who cares what they think!"

BY THAT time I was right in back of him. Yeah, it was Jerry Stone. And he had that long barreled automatic pointed right through the window at them two inside. I couldn't take no chances. There was a lot of reasons for me to do what I did. First, I liked the hairpin and didn't want to see him kill anyone and hang for it. Then if he bumped this Wally, Bette would feel like hell. And third, a murder at the Beebox would wash us up as far as business was concerned.

So I whammed down hard with the butt of my Colt, grabbed him as he fell, jerked him over my shoulder and trotted off. Maybe staggered off is the best word, on account of he was heavy. But the going wasn't so hard that I didn't notice one thing. With the thud of my gunbutt against Stone's skull the light in the cottage had gone out!

Which meant that Wally Masters hadn't been as frightened as he'd pretended! Staggering back against the dresser meant he could jerk the plug to the vanity lights, which was all that was burning.

Back at my house I didn't light the light, thinking maybe that Masters had raised an alarm. Instead, I wet a towel and brought Stone around after tucking his gun away where he couldn't get at it.

Well, sir, he was fine about it. He even thanked me for hitting him in the head. "Not that it'll help any," he said, grim like. "I vowed me a vow to kill them two snakes for what they did to my brother and I'll do it. Howsomever I can see it wouldn't be right for me to do it here, on account of it would make so much trouble for Bette!"

He said that last word like it was sort of holy. He was so much gone over Shanghai's granddaughter that it wasn't even funny.

I lifted my coffee cup and said, "You get caught paying them snakes back for what they did and you'll never get Bette. You'll get the chair instead, mister!"

He nodded grimly. "It's got to be done, Sheriff, it's got to be done. The thing that bothers me most though is that she's in love with him!"

So, I thought! He'd seen Wally putting on his crying act there on the porch of the ranch house. Poor devil! So I said, "Jerry, I don't know you from Adam's off ox, but I like you. Liked you right from the start. I kept you from committing a murder a bit ago and you owe me something, don't you?"

He allowed he owed me quite a bit for keeping him from doing a killing at that particular time.

"Been my experience," I went on, "that rattlesnakes sometimes end up by rattling and striking at the wrong party. Sometimes they get their heads blowed off. Sometimes a roadrunner catches them and kills them. Sooner or later they get caught in a crack. So how about you promising me you'll let things lay until they get away from here, at least?"

And after he promised, I blew out the lamp and we said goodnight.

JERRY STONE was gone the next morning, but his car was still there. He'd left me a note, reading, "Dear Sheriff: I roped me a horse and have gone for a ride. Be back soon. Your nephew, Jerry." And when I checked the remuda and saw what horse he'd taken I glowed all over. None of them easy riding swaybacks for Jerry Stone. No, sir, he rode Dynamite, Gila Pete's rodeo favorite, and a handful for any rider!

Well, sir, the guests all got under way around nine. Getting under way is a sight at the Beebox. Fat dames in flaring riding pants and screwy little derby hats, and carrying what they call bats. And bankers and city dudes dressed up worse than Yakima Tony or Powder River Curly, with hair chaps and loud shirts and mail order boots. They was fixing to go into the Matadors and stay for

(Continued on page 85)

"Barb" had come into the hills country to get away from the sound of gunfire and to check up on a kid he had helped out of a killing fracas. But things didn't work out as he intended . . .

IN THE heavy silence over the wild Jackamon Hills country, sound carried far. It was new country to me, too. So I had no way of judging how distant I was from the rifle that echoed its explosion faintly to my ears.

I wasn't interested, anyhow. I was coming in here to get away from anything pertaining to gunfire, after spending too many years dealing in that commodity. That was one reason I'd staked young Hat Nelson to come up here and buy a piece of land and get a start on a little cow spread: I wanted a place to come to when I tired of being, at various times, outside rider for a big cow outfit in Texas and New Mexico, referee by gunsmoke in range wars, range detective, and trouble-shooter-at-large.

There was one more reason why I, Tom "Barb" Wire had sent Hat Nelson up here: Hat had been dragged into a murder down along the Nueces River in Texas, because he couldn't let the gals alone. I cleared him and, because I liked him, tailed him out of there. Just a few years younger than I, he seemed like a kid brother.

I rode and walked and slid down a

By
PAUL
HANNA

The slug knocked him back as if a mule had kicked him.

TWO MAKES A PAIR

steep slope to a little bench above lightly timbered flats on below, and stopped to blow. I heard a crash of brush to my left and looked that way in time to see a rider round a shoulder on the slope over there. The fool was courting a broken neck, riding angling down that slope in that fashion. No sooner than I had this thought, the horse stumbled and went down tail over tongue.

Dust, bits of shale, and twigs flew up. The rider was tossed clear, but continued to roll and bounce until a low-growing clump of mountain mahogany stopped progress. Miraculously, the horse had managed to gain its feet and

slid to a halt unhurt.

The rider lay piled up, hat gone, a fact that left no doubt as to the person's sex. The old hat had come off and spilled a mint of red-gold hair around a small, oval face. The girl lay on one side, legs drawn slightly up. The thin tight riding skirt the girl wore accentuated every youthful line.

Something caught in my throat as I knelt, slipped one arm under her and raised her to a sitting position. She opened eyes that were large and an odd shade, not green, not all blue. Long eyelashes fluttered and her moist lips framed in a perpetual kiss parted over white, even teeth.

I, who'd gained a reputation of being as rough and pointed as the name Barb Wire, felt myself go soft and shaky inside. And something told me, "Barb Wire, you damned fool, a girl like this around a hairpin like you is like a kid playing with an unloaded gun!"

THE girl stirred and leaned away from me, panting, "I'm not hurt much. Just shaken up and bruised a bit." She jumped up, and the show was over.

"You shouldn't ride down a slope like that, miss—"

"I'm Naomi Laird. Brack Laird is my father," she supplied. "And now I'll have to go. Oh!" She looked at the empty saddle scabbard and her eyes dimmed with what I thought was fear as she began searching through the bush. She fairly pounced on the 30.30 carbine that had spilled out back up the slope, shoved it into the scabbard, and mounted before I could help her.

As she picked up the reins, she gave my outfit a look. "Texas," she stated, nodding at my long taps, romal reins, full rigged hull.

"Uh-huh. Name is Wire, miss—"

"Barb Wire!" she cried. "I—oh, glad to meet you," and she shot her horse with the steel and went away from there toward the rolling flat, like a little valley, below.

"Glad to meet me, hell!" I grumbled. I wondered at the way she'd called my nickname so suddenly. Had that darned fool, Hat, been bragging about me, after I'd warned him never to mention my range detective and law work up here? Well, I'd see Hat in a few minutes, and give that gent what for.

I rode on around a dim trail, following the slope where the girl had appeared. There in a little park among a stand of light pine, with a few birch trees standing sentinel near a tiny stream, I came to the cabin—just as Hat had described it in the few brief letters I'd received from him the year he'd been here.

I yelled as I rode up. A breeze blew the unlatched door back and forth with a creaking sound and my voice echoed hollowly. I had a sudden, empty feeling in my chuckbox; the hollow, to-be-cussed sensation like something was wrong. I looked inside, then in the little stable, and took a narrow, well beaten path that led toward the creek.

I knew Hat Nelson was dead without touching him!

HE LAY on his face, one hand moving gently as it lay in a riffle, the other at his side. The water bucket had rolled a few feet away. The back of Hat's shirt showed a small, wet stain around a tiny hole, and a big stain was drying under him.

After a little while, I got hold of myself to the point where I could roll a cigarette without spilling all my Durham. And then I began putting emotion aside and got down to the cold business of a bloodhound, scenting out a trail.

I knew Hat had been shot with a rifle, and I now remembered the rifle sound I heard earlier, before I saw Naomi Laird. Something froze inside of me right then. She'd come from this direction, she'd been riding fast and dangerously, and she'd been damned scared when she'd found her rifle missing from the boot.

Coupled with this was Hat's ability to get messed up with every cute spotted

"Stick around," she said. "If there's a fight, I'd like to have you on my side."

heifer that cut his trail.

I judged distance by Hat's position and the wound and walked up the slope behind the cabin. Behind a little brushy ridge that overlooked the cabin and the path to the creek, I found where the killer had stood. The ground was hard, but in just one spot it had taken the tiny print of the heel of a riding boot. I swore to myself and ranged, and found the brass cartridge case of a .30-30 still reeking of burnt powder.

I studied the indentation of the gun's firing pin in the cap, and noticed the unevenness on one side. The firing pin had been nicked or chipped a little bit. I stuck the case in my jacket pocket, my heart feeling like a lump of lead. I stood with my head bent, not feeling a damn' bit good, and that was why I discovered something else.

It was a short, chewed stump of cigar,

the ragged butt still moist, with dirt clinging to it. I began to swear as I wrapped the weed in a bandana and started back to the cabin. I was pretty sure Naomi Laird didn't smoke stogies. Which meant the girl had someone with her up here. That or—I prayed right then. Maybe she was covering someone and hadn't killed Hat herself.

I went back down to the cabin and steeled myself to go through Hat Nelson's few belongings. I found a few faded photographs of girls. I found a woman's ruffled, beribboned blue garter with the name "Nurpha" embroidered in gold thread. The garter didn't look as if it had been worn much, and the heady, heavy scent of a strong perfume still clung to it. Buried deep in the corner of Hat's little rawhide covered trunk, I found a little tallybook Hat had carried since I'd first known him down on the Nueces.

I skimmed through it until, toward the end, I came to writing not dimming with age and thumbing over. "B. L.—Yuma," and a date. "K. S.—8 . . . K. S. 9," and more dates. I couldn't figure this at all. I tucked it, along with the garter, into the pocket with the cartridge case and cigar butt and buttoned down the flap.

I stripped a blanket off the bunk, then, and started down the path toward the creek to cover what was left of poor Hat Nelson before I rode back to Keeville for the sheriff. Then I wheeled, my right paw going to the butt of my .45 Colt that I carry in a specially slanted, leather lined right pants pocket.

THREE men rode around the shoulder of the slope and, not taking their eyes off me, dismounted. One of the trio was dull-faced, droopy-eyed with droop pants and packed a five-pointed sheriff's star on his shirt pocket. Gandy, I learned later, was the sherif's name.

The second man was thin, with a rabbity face and manner. This was Brack Laird, Naomi's father. The third man was tall, broadshouldered and sullenly dark. His lips clamped around a cigar! But so did the lips of the sheriff and Brack Laird!

This big man, wearing his pistol low-leathered and thonged to his right leg, was Kern Sugrue, I learned. He had a cow camp on up the valley and ran culls and cheap stuff on leased range. Laird's place was two miles east of Sugrue's camp.

I roped all this learning later, you understand. Right now, I watched their faces as I jerked my head, took a step that put me in full view of Hat's body and rapped out sharply, "My pard, Hat Nelson's been murdered!"

Sheriff Gandy's mouth fell open and he made croaking sound. Brack Laird's nose twitched and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down and he breathed in a frightened jerky manner. Kern Sugrue growled under his breath and he stared at Hat, then at me, in a hard, suspicious manner.

"You're his partner?" Gandy yapped. "Never knew he had one."

The other two men nodded agreement. They didn't know it, either. So why, then, had Naomi Laird known my name?"

"I'm his partner and I can prove it—just like I aim to prove who murdered him!" I snarled. "The name's Wire, Barb Wire—if that means anything to you up here."

"Hell, yes!" Gandy exploded. Laird blinked rapidly and Sugrue sort of hunched his shoulders as he snarled, "We don't need outside interference up here. Gandy can ramrod all our law."

I doubted that. Gandy was the kind of law an outlaw would love—a sit-spit-and-whittle type. He swelled when Sugrue said he was capable of ramrodding the law in the Jackamon Hills, and at a suggestion from Sugrue, ordered all of us to start searching for evidence.

We spread out and worked uphill. It was Sugrue who found the spot where the killer had stomped down a few weeds, and where I'd rubbed out the heelprint of a woman's riding boot. I watched Sugrue as he ranged around, and then

he turned to me.

"Did you make a search before we got here?" he demanded.

"Are *you* the sheriff?" I hammered back. I'd begun to hate him, anyhow.

She came into the room and I flopped on my belly, fast.

"Well, did you?" Gandy asked.

"You haven't heard me say so," I evaded.

Brack Laird piped up now. "Maybe he kilt Nelson hisself," he quavered. Sugrue looked at Laird hard and suspiciously and said, "Shut up, you old fool." Laird showed a flash of angry spirit, then subsided without speaking. We walked back down the hill, and I questioned Gandy now, asking him what had brought him here.

"Couple miles north," he said, "is a sort of store and saloon run by a woman named Nurpha Mimms. There's always a lot of shady customers passing through, stopping over there, but I don't bother, because as long as they stop off at Nurpha's, they ain't down in Keeville raising hell."

"Uh-huh." I was thinking of the blue garter with the name Nurpha stitched on it.

"Couple days ago, Hat Nelson got

soused up there. Or seemed to. With a shady case called Handers. Handers was found out in the hills last evening. Shot to doll rags. I got word, come out, and got Laird and Sugrue to hide me and come down here to question Hat."

I nodded. Gandy got a horse out of the corral and we packed Hat's body on it. As we started for town, Sugrue glared at me, said, "Huddem you, you're hiding something," just like he was sure I was, and rode away with Laird.

WE BURIED Hat next day, and I rode back to the range before any of the others who'd come in for the sketchy funeral. Naomi Laird had been there with her old man. She looked scared and sick and watched me at every turn. Sugrue was there, too, and the girl seemed in fear of him, as did her father.

So I hurried, and rode wide of Sugrue's cow camp that was a collection of wagons, tents, one board shack, and several corrals. I was surprised at the number of steers I stirred up. Culls, mostly, feeding well on rich bottom grass and in little parks and pockets in the hills. And some not culls.

"A swell setup for holding rustled stuff," I told myself. "Gandy wouldn't be a hold-back at all."

I sighted the Laird's little house in a small grove of pine, left my horse in a little draw and skirted around. The house wasn't locked and I walked right in. In the kitchen, I looked at pegs in the wall, and knew they'd been placed to support a rifle. But no rifle rested there. I looked in corners, went into a small room I knew was Brack Laird's, fished under his cot, all over. No gun, yet I knew they'd not taken it to town with them.

I felt silly as hell as I moved into a room typically a woman's. The bed had a lacey cover, there was a curtain on the wall, and a lot of girl's clothes hanging under it. The curtain hung from a shelf nailed out from the wall. I found a .30-30 carbine pushed back on this shelf.

I spun around then, cussing because I'd not realized how much time I'd spent here until I heard the Laird's ride up outside. I was caught with a wildcat on my rope and a busted saddlehorn! I put the rifle back and, like a tinhorn burglar, was forced to flop on my belly and scoot under Naomi's bed.

I heard her speak to her father when they came in. Naomi's voice sounded strained, like she was waiting for Brack to say something. All he said was, "Change your clothes and we'll get down that stuff we're going to corral and wean."

She came into her room and shut the door. I watched her feet as she went to the clothes shelf, saw her stand on tiptoe and dared a look that showed her feeling up on the shelf, touching the carbine. I heard her whimper, "What will I do?" as she stood flat again. My heart thumped, my palms got moist then, as she moved nearer the bed. For a moment, I thought she must have seen me. She hesitated, leaned over, then straightened and went out. I heard her tell her father, "Go ahead, I'll catch up with you," and make excuse for not riding out right then.

Brack went away. I waited. Naomi came back into the room and closed the door. "Y-you can cuh-come out," she sobbed.

Believe me, I felt seven kinds of damned jackass as I wiggled out and got to my feet. She looked up at me her lips quivering, her eyes puddling up.

"Huh-he didn't do it!" she bawled, and before I knew it, she was against me, holding onto me, sobbing. "He didn't do it," and becoming hysterical. Her moist face, the puckered lips turned up toward me, pitched me plumb off my horse sense. Next thing I knew, I was kissing her—and it quieted her! So help me, it did!

"You'll believe me," she panted, stepping back and staring up at me. "You'll believe my father didn't shoot poor Hat—even if they did have words?"

"I'll try to believe you, Naomi, if you'll tell me everything."

I STOOD there, one arm around her waist, while she talked and I asked questions. She was, it seemed, the only one Hat had told about me. "My father didn't object to me riding over to see Hat," she said. Adding, "At first. Then, after I'd slapped Kern Sugrue's face one day, when he'd tried to pull me off my horse, my father told me not to see Hat any more. I liked Hat. After the first time he tried to kiss me, and I wouldn't, we got along fine.

"You see," her voice lowered, "I explained I was waiting for the right man." And she wouldn't look at me!

"Anyhow," she went on, "I refused to stop visiting Hat. Dad said Hat fooled around up at Nurpha Mimms' place, too. I didn't care. It was funny. Dad seemed afraid for me to see Hat any more. He didn't use to seem afraid of anybody, until Kern Sugrue came into the country with that hard bunch of his. Dad changed then."

I tried to figure this and it didn't make much sense. I got down to Hat's death. It seemed that on the morning of his death, Brack Laird had, somehow, learned of a visit Naomi had paid Hat the day before. Merely to take Hat a homemade pie, she said. Anyhow, Laird had commanded and then begged Naomi to stop seeing Hat and had ridden off. Naomi, after a while, had followed the trail to Hat's, heard a shot, saw a flash of a rider tailing away.

She had gone up above the cabin and found her father's rifle there, jacked out the shell in a panicky hurry, took the gun and tailed away. Later that day, Brack had complained he couldn't figure where his saddle gun had gone to. . . .

"But it couldn't have been my father," she insisted.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "No," I said dully. "I guess not."

In my heart, I knew she had killed Hat; or she and her father together. Because there was the chewed cigar butt. And it didn't stand to reason a killer would leave a gun behind, unless—

A ray of hope, faint and feeble but a hope, pierced the gloom in my head.

"Your father doesn't know you suspect him?" I asked.

"No. I—but I don't suspect him!" she cried.

"You mean you don't want to," I accused, giving her shoulder a small squeeze as I left her so I wouldn't have to answer the questions I saw her lips framing.

I got my horse and rode hurriedly and overtook Brack Laird on the trail to his upper range. I made no mention, of course, of seeing Naomi. Laird pulled into himself like a scared rabbit when I overhauled him. I wasted no time.

"Laird, I want to know where you were the morning Hat was murdered," I snapped. "Where did you meet Sheriff Gandy and Sugrue?"

Laird turned the color of a dead fish's belly. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out two cigars and offered me one in a hand that trembled. "Good ones," he said in a cracked voice. "Sugrue give them to me." I thought I heard a whispered, wheezed, "Damn him!" after that; but wasn't sure. I decined the stogie.

"Come on, Laird," I growled. "Give up head."

"I was riding to meet Sugrue and comb out a patch of brush for strays," Laird whined. This man was scared! "He'd rode on. I met him heading back for his camp. His horse was some sweaty and he aimed to change. He'd been chasing an old mossie on a sidehill, he said."

"You suspect anybody, Brack?" I demanded. "Of killing Hat? What was the trouble between Hat and your girl?"

"You leave my girl out of this, damn you to hell!" Laird cried, and showed spirit for the first time. He rode away from me, making me wish to heavens I could leave Naomi out of this. Because I could see that Brack Laird didn't believe he lost his saddle gun. Maybe he'd found it where Naomi had hidden it.

I TURNED my horse's head northward, upward. It was a hard climb. I figured: Brack and Sugrue weren't together when Hat was shot, but they were when Gandy came on them to get them to Hat's about this Handers shooting. Well, that Handers shooting was something I wanted to learn about. I was building up a little spread of facts, now. A poor spread, I had to admit, with no hole card. Maybe I could run a bluff. Still, all things pointed to Naomi now.

Hell! I knew I loved her. Yet I'd turn her over to the law for killing my young partner once I'd clinched things on her. What else could I do? The only thing was to fight my head and hopes and try to figure somebody else into this thing. I took out Hat's old tally book and again studied the cryptic "B. L.—Yuma; K. S.—8; K. S.—9" and the dates behind them. The Yuma date was many, many years ago; the others of very recent date. Hell, the last one was dated the day before Hat was killed!

B. L. Brack Laird. But what had Yuma, Arizona to do with it?

K. S. Kern Sugrue. What did the figures mean?

I had a hunch that the death of this owlhoot Handers that Hat had been drinking with, had a tie-in with the figures in that little tally book.

Nurpha Mimms' place was a long, low place constructed of logs about a foot through, with a gallery along the front. It sat against a rising hogback with a timbered, light downslope in front. There were three horses tied to the gallery posts. I added my chestnut gelding. One of the three whey-bellies wore Sugrue's Shamrock-in-a-Heart brand—a little design that would cover one hell of a lot of other irons, you'll notice.

I moved my six-gun up and down in my pocket to see that it was free and easy. It always is, since the sight is filed off—and not because I'm afraid somebody will take it away from me and shove it down my throat, either. I just don't want a sight, useless in close, fast-draw work, around to clutter up and catch on things.

I walked in. There was a big front room with a few card tables and chairs, a big, slab-fronted bar and three customers. Two of them looked at me and showed their teeth. To them, I spelled lawman and they just didn't like lawmen. I didn't blame them for that. The other man was of the same stamp, but he was Kern Sugrue's man. I knew that by the black hairs clinging to the dirty levis he wore; the Shamrock-in-a-Heart branded horse outside was the only black tied there. Just like that!

These rannies knew who I was. I stepped up to the bar and while I tapped a silver dollar for someone to come out and serve me, one of the owlhoot earmarked gents growled, "I've heard fences are strung with barbed wire nowadays. Huddem a fence!"

I got the reference to my name, but I pretended I didn't. I turned my attention to the woman who came through a doorway at the end of the bar, stopped abruptly and stood eyeing me inside and out with a pair of eyes that were black and heated and secretive.

She wore a skin-tight black dress, low necked. Her face was expressionless, slashed by a mouth that was full and cruelly sensuous and damned selfish. And *she* knew who I was, too.

I leaned on the bar, ordered my drink and said for her alone, "I'd rather drink a bottle with you by yourself." Her eyes narrowed. Her jaw got hard, and then she said, "A lot of roadrunners would like that. But—come on."

I TURNED just as I started through the door at the end of the bar. Kern Sugrue's man was going outside and like a guy who wants to reach Cheyenne in a hurry. Nurpha Mimms said, "Wait!" in a sharp voice. The rannie lagged.

I was led into a room with a small fire in the fireplace at one end. There were deep, large chairs, and a couch covered with a soft, Indian-cured deerhide. Nurpha Mimms brought out a bot-

tle and two glasses and while she filled them said, "Roll me a cigarette, Wire."

"You know me, all right." I got out makings.

"Why not? You're a lawman. Your rat partner—nobody knew he was your partner—got killed. I expected you."

"Hat Nelson wasn't a rat."

"No," she mocked. "He didn't get Handers primed on redeye and then kill him?"

"He pumped Handers," I admitted. "But didn't kill him. Yeah, he learned plenty from that bush-running busky, and passed it on." I was laughing at her to back up my bluff. "What sort was Handers?"

"An old-timer, Wire. Knew a lot about lots of people."

"Sure." We tossed off our drinks. "He knew about a guy in Yuma, years ago. He knew about—"

"Sure. About how many head of rustled beef Kern Sugrue had bought from this outlaw and that. Stuff rustled a long way from here and shoved in by men who had to have a runaway stake. I see you *do* know what Hat Nelson found out. Well, Handers always was mouthy, when he got his skin full.

"You know, too," I said, "why Hat got those figures."

"Maybe," she admitted. "Yes, I think I do. To hold as a threat over Sugrue, because Sugrue wanted that Laird girl to stay away, and was forcing Laird to make her do it. . . . Don't ask me what Sugrue's hold on Laird is, though. I wouldn't know."

She poured more drinks, leaning as she handed me mine and staring right straight into my eyes. Something seemed to reach right down and pull my stomach upward a foot or so. She blinked, bit her lips and said, "Stick around. I think I'd like to have you on my side."

She went out into the bar. Pretty soon I heard a horse hit a run away from the place. Sugrue's man, I thought. She'd sent for Sugrue. It was my time to beat it. Some feeling I couldn't describe grabbed hold of me. I was beginning to figure Naomi out of this, and I'd do better, I believed, if I stuck around.

Nurpha came back and sat down on the couch beside me. I pulled the garter I'd found in Hat's trunk out of my pocket and handed it to her.

"Sure. I gave that to Hat," she said. "Rather, he took it. Hat was a pretty good kid, at that." She tossed the garter into a corner, and without another word, she put her arms around my neck.

Something tingled up my spine.

She leaned back in my arms, fingering my face. "You know what I've done?" she murmured.

"Yes. You've sent for Kern Sugrue."

"I have. You see, I'm getting tired of Sugrue, and all he thinks of is that Laird girl, anyhow."

"You hope I'll kill him, huh?"

"Maybe. If you don't, I'll be all right, because I'll point out I sent for him and held you here. If you kill him—" she smiled— "I'll try to keep the others off your neck."

I FIGURED she lied. She'd like to see Sugrue and me both killed. I had a hunch she feared Sugrue, and that I was too much law for her.

"What do you know about Hat being killed?" I demanded.

"Nothing. Nothing but an idea as to who did it—and I'm not handing out ideas." I was beginning to cuss myself for being ten kinds of a fool for sticking here, and I got up, about decided to leave. I heard a door bang, heavy footsteps, a rap on the door.

"Nurpha," Kern Sugrue called. I nodded. She opened the door. Sugrue, gun drawn and the hammer held back, stepped in and kicked the door closed behind him. But I had my gun drawn, too, and also had the hammer back.

"Put—that—down!' Sugrue snarled. "There's three men outside there, don't forget."

"You weren't banking on them when you loped in here."

"Nope," he admitted. "Not altogether.

(Continued on page 78)

By DALE BOYD

They said he was a killer and a torturer. But who was he, this Digame Smith? Every man and woman in town wanted to catch up with him—but particularly Juanita. . . .

THE whole trouble was the town's reputation. A town can get a reputation, you know, just like a man, and the citizens of that town sometimes get as proud of it as they are of their own. Laughter don't hurt us none, nor derision—we shed that stuff like a duck shedding water. But when it gets down to something serious, well I guess they ain't one of us that don't sort of take a leaf out of that feller's book that said, "When you call me that, smile!"

Suppose we are wide open in spite of state and federal laws. Suppose we do have gambling houses, and a few dance halls. We don't give no odds and we don't ask none. Snuffbox buries its own dead.

Lot of people laugh at that name, Snuffbox. Wasn't always named that, matter of fact. When old man Dorgan founded the town a damnable long time ago, he called it after his favorite brand of snuff, Copenhagen, but that was a mite too fancy for some of the boys that used to flock out of the *brasada* and spend their spondulicks with us. First thing you know everybody said Snuffbox,

"Who am I?" she said, sweet-like. "I'm the woman who's been losing cattle the last seven or eight months." Her quirt came out and lashed against Tim's britches.

Men of Snuffbox

Illustrated by
H. L. V. Parkhurst

and Snuffbox, Texas, it finally got to be, even on all the maps.

I call my newspaper the *Snuffbox Jacks*. Which also arouses a bit of comment among Easterners and dudes, but there's sense to the name. A man needs jacks or better in a poker game, don't he? Okay. Everybody that reads my up-to-snuff little weekly journal of facts and figures can open any conversation.

Well, sir, rightly there's a lot of lying behind this story, and it's a temptation to go into it, but I'll just get under way the night Sue Dorgan wrecked the Maverick, which same, as everybody knows, is owned and operated by Judge Waldo Emerson Benedict.

I recall it was a fair, quiet night, being about the fifth of the month and the cowpunchers having spent their wages a good many nights ago. The judge and Kate Carmichael, and young Tim Lee, our sheriff, and Horace Hobson, our banker, and me, Calvin Stroud,

editor, was sitting at a table talking over the situation along the border.

THE fiddler and the git-tar player in the dancehall, back beyond was a-going to town, and several of Katie's girls were dancing with the town idlers, and a right perty sight they were, too. All Katie's girls is pure ladies, ladies from A to Izzard. None of them short skirts coming clear up to silk knees, and none of them low backed dresses showing a gal's spine all the way, or low necked enough to catch the drippin's from a drink. No, sir, all ladies, dressed like ladies and conducting themselves accordingly, from Miss Prince, from Boston, cultured as an encyclopedia, to Juanita, who had just come up from Torreon.

Reckon it was Juanita that started us talking about the border. She came into the circle of bright lamplight dancing with Carson, from the Circle Dot. And she was such a pretty picture, with her red silk dress clinging to her as tight as sunburn, and her olive skin and black hair and black eyes, that both Lee and Hobson, the sheriff and the banker, shoved back their chairs and said, "Pardon me," to Kate Carmichael. Then both of them stood there glaring at each other while the music stopped and it was too late to cut in on the Mex girl.

Lee shrugged and grinned. Hobson shrugged and sat down again, but Lee went on out and spoke to the girl and walked her to the bar for a drink. I tell you, Hobson's eyes were hot after them, and you could tell by the way the Mex girl walked that she knew.

Kate laughed. She said, "Hobby, you going to let Tim Lee cut you right out there, are you?"

Hobby drank his drink and said, "Who cares? What's a dancehall babe more or less? Specially a Mexican?"

Now, Hobson was the banker, and lots of times both me and the judge need loans. We have to do business with Hobby, the same as we'd done with his old man, so, knowing Kate's temper, and how it rose when she was insulted, we both tried to change the subject. And it wasn't no use.

She leaned across the table and shook her finger in Hobby's face. "That girl, my little friend," she said in her bass voice, "is a damned sight too good for the likes of you. She comes from a damned fine family in Torreon. That *bandido*, Digame Smith, wiped her folks out and burned the *hacienda*, or she wouldn't be here. So don't you go speaking of her like that." Whereupon she took a fresh seegar out of her purse, bit off the end, lit it and tossed the match over her shoulder, never relaxing her glare at all.

Hobson said. "Digame Smith! Digame Smith! When I was little, my folks used to scare me by saying the bad man or the boogey man was going to get me. Now it's Digame Smith. I don't think there is any such guy!"

HE SAID it in a big loud voice, loud enough to carry right through the Maverick. And I tell you, everybody stopped whatever they were doing and looked at Hobby. Folks didn't talk about Digame Smith like that around our part of the country, even though he'd never been to Snuffbox personally. Plenty of Snuffbox citizens had had something to do with that man, always to their darned sorry sorrow. In case you don't know no Spanish, Digame means "tell me" and you pronounce it with three syllables, like dee-ga-me, with the accent heavy on the first syllable.

Reckon the big writers would say Digame was a legendary figure along the border, but those of us who lived there knew there wasn't nothing of fables or legend about him. He was a rooting-tooting two-gun man, whose mother had been Mex and his daddy American. He took all the devilment from both races and didn't fit in with either. So he gathered himself a gang of daredevils around him, stayed close to the river, and was wanted by Americans and Mexicans alike, for everything from smuggling to extortion and kidnaping, with a bit of fancy murder thrown in.

"I never want to see you again until you can do your job as sheriff," she said.

Where'd he get that name? Well, sir, he had a gentle habit of swooping down on some *hacienda* or *rancho* whose owner had just been paid off for his year's cattle and still had the money around the house. He'd ordinarily string the poor owner—or maybe his wife or his favorite daughter—up by his or her thumbs and strip 'em, then use a running iron to find out where the money was hidden.

He'd stand there before 'em, a handkerchief covering most of his face but his eyes glowing like devil coals, and swinging a red hot running iron right before his victim's face, and he'd say, "Tell me! Tell me! *Digame! Digame!*" And there was damned few folks that didn't tell him.

Funny part was that for years the ranny had been sort of a Robin Hood man of mystery, and then all of a sudden, here in the last year or so he's got mean. First he'd been plain Surdo Smith, but after he went kill-crazy and started torturing, he was Digame.

Well, anyway, like I say, Hobson made his speech loud enough to be heard all over, for the music hadn't started yet. I recall Juanita was about to take a drink, but she set it back down on the bar and turned toward the table. You

know anything about *Mexicano* women? No?

Well, sir, in one regard they're all alike, all the same. They'll be just as quiet and docile as a lead steer one minute, and go on a rampage the next. Like dynamite. You know, even a stick of the stuff with a two inch fuse ain't dangerous until some danged fool touches a match to it. And the mention of Digame's name was the match touched to Juanita's fuse.

Here she came, her slender body fairly quivering with rage, and she banged the table with her hand so that the glasses jumped. "So," she sneered, "so there is no Digame Smith! Then who was it killed my father? Who tortured my poor mother, who carried my sister to the hills, damn him? And who put these scars on me?"

HER SLENDER little fingers clawed at the shoulder of her dress, there was the sound of ripping cloth. And, I tell you, what she showed us wasn't pretty to look at. Across her shoulders, disappearing somewhere under her dress, was the ugliest white scar you ever saw. Even me, it almost made sick.

"Digame Smith did that," she spat, and never in all my life did I see such hatred in a human's eyes. "You say there is no such man, I tell you if there is not, then I, Juanita Gomez, have nothing for which to live. I live for the day when I shall meet that Digame Smith again!"

The judge cleared his throat and he said, "Well, sister, how do you figure you'll know him? They say the ranny always operates masked."

"I'll know him," she snapped, and pulled her dress back over her tawny shoulder. "Juanita will know him! And to the man who brings him to me, makes it possible for me to meet him face to face—I give—" she spread her arms wide, her eyes flashed, her mouth was red and moist—"I give Juanita, myself!"

Now on paper it doesn't sound like much. Could you have seen it, you'd have felt the same way the rest of us did. Me, I'm on the shady side of fifty, but seeing her standing there like that, her hips sort of swaying and her mouth like that, and her lips so red and inviting, well sir, even me, Cal Stroud, felt young. And the judge told me afterward that he felt like getting on a horse for the first time in twenty years, so as he could go out and ride down this here Digame Smith.

Hobson's eyes glowed like coals and he licked his lips and reached for her. But he was too late. Tim Lee beat him to it. Tim, our sheriff, yelled, "Hooray for 'Nita and to hell with Digame!" And he put his big hands on her slender waist and raised her high over his head while the rest of us thumped the table with our glasses and cheered him on. I guess everyone of us figured how lucky the guy would be that showed her Digame Smith.

Katie laid her seegar down and grunted, her eyes sort of popping. I followed the direction of her gaze and grunted, too. Hobson quit looking at the Mex gal. Everybody quit what they were doing except poor Tim Lee. He was so enthusiastic he let Juanita down and kissed her, with a lot of cooperation on her part. A voice came from the front door, a not too loud voice, but one that filled the Maverick anyway. It was Sue Dorgan's voice. She stood there inside the door slapping at her boots with her quirt, and she said, "What the hell goes on here?"

IN THE first place, Sue had no business coming in the Maverick. Her kind of gals shouldn't. They ruin business. Sue's grampa had started this here now town, years ago, and she was still the acknowledged queen, what with owning some forty thousand acres of land and the Lord knows how many cattle and sheep. She ran that ranch herself, too, her daddy being dead and her being alone—and she was sweet on Tim Lee.

Women are like dogs, in a way. I don't reckon Juanita cared really for Tim Lee. But as soon as she saw that possessive look in Sue's eyes, all hell couldn't have

Hobson, the banker, let him have it with a sandhook. That was enough.

torn her loose from him. She kept her arm around his neck, and she curled her lip and said, *"Corazon,* who is this woman?"

And here came Sue, all of us giving her plenty of riding room, knowing the Dorgan temper. "Who am I?" she said, sweet like. "I'm the woman that once was going to marry this louse!" And *wham* went her quirt, right across the seat of Tim Lee's britches. "I'm the woman that's been losing cattle across the border for the last seven or eight months, the woman that's tired of depending on a woman-chasing sheriff to put a stop to my rustling losses!"

None of us said a word, not with her wielding that quirt! You could have heard a six-shooter drop, it was that quiet. She went on, "I'm the woman that got tired of it, I tell you. I'm the woman that sent for the Rangers a week ago, to do work our sheriff ought to be doing

while he's hugging and a kissing a dime-a-dozen dance hall tramp!"

Now folks, that tore it in more ways than one. I told you at the start how we loved our town and its reputation, how we buried our own dead. Her sending for the Rangers to solve a little thing like rustling was plenty bad. It was a slap in the face to all us citizens of Snuffbox, and a kick in the pants to Tim Lee, who was the sheriff.

Tim's face got red; Hobson, the banker, grinned. But Juanita got pale. She walked up and put her own face a couple of inches from Sue's. And she said, "You called me a what, senorita?"

I crawled under the table, but the judge was ahead of me and there wasn't room for both of us, the judge weighing what he does. Crack went the quirt, right around Juanita's hips. Then Juanita's fingers went into Sue's hair and the battle was on. Seems like in split seconds they was a rolling over and over on the floor. There wasn't no squealing and yelping like when two of Katie's gals go to town on each other. No sir, there was just the sound of ripping cloth and the thump of soft bodies on the floor.

I peeked out just in time to get what was left of Juanita's dress right in my face.

Suddenly they rolled apart. Sue had dropped her quirt at at the start. She leaned against the bar, panting, blood trickling from her mouth. And Juanita, well sir, she crouched maybe six feet from her, her back toward the door, her lips curled, her eyes blazing. And we all saw it at the same time. It being a knife, tucked away beneath the garter that circled the Mex gal's pretty leg. Her brown fingers went down and wrapped themselves around the handle, it came out in her hand.

"So," she said softly, "I'm a dancehall tramp?" She started to leap for Sue. And she didn't make it. A hand reached out and grabbed her wrist. A man laughed from behind her, and jerked her back against his breast, and he said, "So, *paloma mia*, so! What is it you wish to do with that knife? *Digame! Digame!*"

He was a tall ranny, dark like a Mex, with a Mex's liquid brown eyes and white teeth. He wore a Mex *sombrero*, and *charro* trousers. And a pair of heavy sixguns hanging at his slim hips. A damned funny thing happened then. Lord, you never know what a woman will do next. Juanita dropped her knife, stiffened, she turned toward this feller. She said softly, *"Digame? Digame?"*

And damn my eyes if she didn't turn and press her lips up against his and kiss hell out of him. That Mex might have been surprised, but he wasn't passing up a thing. He kissed her right back. And so help me, in a minute they walked toward the back of the Maverick with their arms around each other spouting Spanish for all they was worth, just like me and all the rest of us was a thousand miles away.

Tim he went over to Sue and took out his handkerchief and tried to wipe her face, but she slapped his hand away. He said, "Sue, is it true you wrote the governor for Rangers?"

She nodded and he shook his head miserably. "That'll sure give me a black eye," he said.

"I'll give you worse than that, you Casanova," she grated. "Now I never want to see you again till you can do your job as sheriff, and maybe not then! Playing around with dancehall women!" And out she went, leaving poor Tim broken-hearted, for everybody knew how much he really loved Sue Dorgan.

WELL, sir, everything happened at once. Not half an hour after she left who comes in but the Texas Ranger. He was a tall, mean-looking *hombre*, with the poisonous look of a wildcat and his star a beaming and a shining on his calfskin vest. But wait, I'm getting a bit ahead of my story.

Pancho is the bartender, has been for years, and he's sort of unofficial mayor of Snuffbox's *Mexicano* citizens. I happened to be looking at him when the Mexican feller stopped Juanita from gutting Sue Dorgan, and Pancho's eyes were wide and rolling, and he turned a

sort of dirty yellow. His lips kept saying one word, over and over, and that word was *"Digame, Digame!"*

So, after they left, and me and the judge came out from beneath the table. I sidled over to the bar and hoisted a quick one and I asked Pancho a question. Did he answer it? He did! He shrugged and rolled his eyes like a boogered steer and said, *"Quien sabe, quien sabe?"* And he was right. For I'd asked him if that Mexican wasn't Digame Smith and he'd answered, "Who knows!"

Back at the table Katie Carmichael and Hobson, the young banker, was arguing the same thing, Hobson contending that because a guy said, "Tell me, tell me," it didn't prove he was Digame Smith, the *bandido*, and Katie puffing on her seegar and claiming her woman's intuition told her the Mex was Digame just as sure as shooting.

And then it was that the Ranger came. Well, sir, like I say he was a surly sort of individual, but then Rangers, some of them, are like that. Some of them have sort of cast a wide loop themselves before moving over to the side of law and order, and I reckon this one must have sowed his oats. He looked it.

Tim Lee walked over and introduced himself, the Ranger saying his name was Luke Jones. Tim said, "Reckon you'll want to ride out and see Miss Dorgan, Mister Jones, so if you want I should—"

Jones, he said, "I saw her back at the hotel. She gave me the whole layout. I'll go ride the river tomorrow—by myself!" And it was pretty plain by his attitude that he didn't think much of the local law. Tim sort of flushed and walked away to our table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

ABOUT that time Juanita and the big feller came back. The big feller walked to the bar and told Pancho to set 'em up for the house. Sort of looked like Juanita had lost all interest in him, for she began smiling up at the Ranger, and sort of preening herself like women do when they want to catch a man's eye. But Jones, he didn't pay her no mind, just scowled at her, and when Pancho passed him the bottle he said, "Had plenty, and I can buy my own."

I looked at the judge and the judge looked at me, and both of us laid hands on the table, ready to tip her and dive under again, for it surely looked like trouble was brewing at the bar. Those two fellows were about the same size and the same build, and me, personal, I'd have hated to meet either one of 'em in an alley on a dark night.

The dark fellow he never lost his smile, he just stepped over and pushed Juanita aside. This Ranger fellow never lost his scowl. Juanita came backing clear to our table and sank down in a chair, her eyes bright and fascinated. "Well?" snarled the Ranger. "If you're so tough, *hombre*, fill your hand!"

Two hands dropped to gun butts. They were only eight or ten feet apart, them rannies, and both of them would have died sure as the devil made cactus for neither of them wanted to back down. And a new voice said, "Easy does it, gents!" And Tim Lee, our sheriff, walked in the doorway with a Colt in each hand. Tim had a convincing way with a gun himself. "This here is my town, Snuffbox," he went on casual like. "I'm the law here, and that goes for you, Ranger. Reckon if I did my duty I'd de-gun the pair of you, but you both look reasonable. Take your hands away from the gun-butts and drink up!"

And it was over as quick as it started. All but for what Katie Carmichael said. She whispered. "Did you see his hand, Cal? What did I tell you?" Reckon I looked blank. Triumphantly she went on in that coarse whisper, "He reached for his left gun! He's left handed! And Digame Smith used to be called Surdo before he got so mean, Surdo, meaning left-handed!"

Juanita got up. Lord, that girl was pretty! She'd put on another dress, of course, only this one fit her more tight than the other. Hell, she was a fine looking woman, specially when she smiled that tantalizing smile of hers.

She said, "Digame Smith, because he's

left handed! *Señora*, you are mistaken. Believe me, I would know Digame Smith among a million——and believe me as strongly when I say I'll find him!"

I expected Katie to bawl her out, what with never taking no back talk from ladies that work for her, but Katie grinned and patted her on the hip. She said, "Reckon you would, honey," and when Juanita went back to Luke Jones, the Ranger, Katie wouldn't even explain what she meant.

NEXT morning I was in my office setting a bit of type concerning the coming of one Luke Jones, Ranger, when who walks in but this ranger hisself. He sat down with me, and did what he called grinning, and I broke out a bottle. Now he wasn't such a bad fellow, and he sure knew how to get the information he wanted.

Most of all he wanted to know about Digame Smith, and I was the lad to tell him because I'd published so many stories of the Mexican badman. Finishing up, I said, "Reckon this Digame just went loco, Mr. Jones. For a long while he was sort of a Robin Hood. He robbed the rich and gave to the poor, just dandy. Then he got blood-thirsty and started using that red-hot running iron of his on rich and poor alike." Jones nodded.

He said, "Some of them get like that, Mr. Stroud. Is this Miss Sue Dorgan convinced that it's Digame that's stripping her herd out of the river pasture?"

I nodded. "You see there's a Mexican election coming up, Jones. Always in election year the *bandidos* can make good money, because usually the Mex that gets licked at the polls runs up in the hills and starts him an army. Armies has got to be fed. Which means the *bandido* can have a bunch of beef back in the mountains and can sell them to the *politico* for good money."

"Yeah. How come this sheriff, Tim Lee, hasn't done anything? Looks like he'd take a posse and—"

"Snuffbox lawmen don't take posses, mister. We got tradition in this town. Reckon you didn't know that in the old days Luke Short and Dallas Stroudenmire and Bill Thompson was all Snuffbox sheriffs. No sir, Lee's got a tradition to keep up like."

Jones got up, laughing. "Well, maybe he's right. While he follows tradition, I'll go out to the Dorgan *rancho* and follow the rustlers."

I said cautiously, "You see that Mexican feller you almost clashed with last night?" You see I had to be careful, it not being healthy to accuse a feller of being Digame Smith.

Jones looked at me tough-like, twisted a cigarette with one hand, and lit it before he answered. He said, "Yeah, Cal. I know what you mean. Juanita told me what you fellers figured. But you're wrong. His name is Jose Risueno; he ain't Digame Smith, you can count on it."

And when he went out, all I could think of was Juanita. Boy, for a gal just starting out in the business she was getting around. First this dark feller, Jose Risueno, then the Ranger, Luke Jones. And Hobson, our banker, and Tim Lee, our sheriff, all ready to tangle over her any minute. She was a firebrand—and me? Hell, I'm an old man, but I had some ideas about that Juanita myself!

I WENT back throwing type in the stick thinking about this and that, mostly Juanita. And who walks in and says, *Buenos dias, señor!*" but Jose Risueno, as romantic-looking as ever. Well, sir, he sat down and he chewed the rag a while with me and me being not so dumb, I figured him out right away. The son of a gun was pumping me! He asked me all about Tim Lee, he asked me all about Sue Dorgan and her ranch. He asked me about Hobson the banker, and Judge Benedict, and even about Katie Carmichael.

Finally I said, "*Hombre*, maybe you think you're getting away with something. You've been pumping me for twenty minutes about Snuffbox citizens. Now suppose you tell me why before I salivate you with this sixgun!" For I'd opened

the drawer of my desk and lifted my gun while I was talking.

He grinned. He said, "It's plenty rusty, Mr. Stroud!" And like a fool I looked down at it. That *hombre* had a grip like iron. He twisted that gun out of my hand, and broke it and took out the cartridges. Then he laid it on the desk and he said, "Much obliged for all the information, *señor*," and out he went.

Twenty minutes later I was at the Maverick, drowning my shame. Twenty years ago a Mex couldn't have taken my gun, by gosh! The judge came in and sat down. Katie came down from upstairs and bought a seegar from the bartender. Hobson came in.

Hobson said, "You know I don't like the looks of this here Jose Risueno. Why don't somebody tip the Ranger off that he's Digame Smith?"

The judge bristled. "Why tip the Ranger?" he snorted. "Hell, Snuffbox takes care of her own! We don't want no foreigner from Austin coming in here. I figure we ought to take turns watching this here Mex, and when he makes a break, take him ourselves, for Tim Lee."

So that was what we decided to do. Hobson said, "You know, of course, that the first of the month Sue Dorgan gets her last draft from the cattle company, don't you? It's going to be about eight thousand dollars, and she wants it cashed, she told me so yesterday. Looks to me like that's how come Digame is around here. Suppose I look him up and keep my eye on him until evening, then one of you take over."

So it was agreed, and Hobson went out looking for Jose Risueno. The Ranger, he'd done gone out to Dorgan's ranch to look for signs. Katie said, "Juanita swears that Jose ain't Digame. Wish I knew how she could tell."

And right away I get an idea. I decide to find out how she can tell herself. So I go away as easy as I could and went upstairs. I tapped on the door and a soft voice said, *"Quien es?"* And me, I said it was Mr. Calvin Stroud, and I went in.

But hell, I forgot all about finding out how she figured she could recognize Digame Smith, the man who'd used a running iron on her and killed her papa and mom.

She hadn't been up very long. Her hair was still damp like from her bath and she smelled like good clean soap. She smiled at me in the dresser mirror, and she said, real throaty, "I thought you'd never come." And she turned and walked toward me. Then up comes her arms and her eyes was closed and her lips parted. I kissed hell out of her!

And a funny thing happened. She opened her eyes and looked disappointed. And she shrugged, and sighed, and said, *"Vamos!* Good-bye."

And, damn my eyes, she puts me out! Did anybody ever hear tell of such a funny woman? What a business, what a business!

Next day it was my turn to keep on Jose Risueno's trail. Which is how I found out what happened at Dorgan's, for the Mex saddled up and started out as bold as you please for the river ranch. Me, I trailed along, maybe a mile behind him.

Straight to the river pasture he went, and I flatter myself I was a good trailer, for he didn't see me. Pretty soon from the butte I could look down and see his horse tied in a bunch of water willows. I got off my own pony and took a path down the butte. Me, I'm pretty bulky, what with my years, but I managed to sneak up into that glade and see that Mex talking away like the dickens to—the Ranger! A talking and a laughing like they was old pals. Closer and closer I crept.

And the Mex said, "Kid, we really got these citizens fooled, haven't we?"

And the Ranger laughed, nasty-like, and agreed that they had us all fooled. The Mex said, "Reckon there's four or five thousand head of cattle in this pasture."

The Ranger nodded. "Damned fine ford about a half mile round the bend, too. Them cattle would bring a lot of *dinero* in Mexico."

And the Mex wrapped up a cigarette and lit it. He said, "The woman gets

about eight thousand dollars cash the first of the month." The Ranger nodded and licked his lips at the thought of that much. Then the Mex said, "We got to be damned careful, though. That newspaper fellow sort of suspected something yesterday." The newspaper fellow being me!

Back I went, like a shadow, if a fat one, and I got on that horse of mine and skedaddled hell for leather for the Dorgan place. There was Sue, out in the barnyard messing around, looking as pretty as a blaze-faced heifer in her tight levis and man's shirt open at the throat.

I said, "Honey, where's Tim Lee? I got to see—"

She snapped, "That woman-chasing Casanova? He's probably back in town by now and good riddance. Coming out here and bawling me out for calling a Ranger, telling me it was an insult to Snuffbox to call in outside help! A fine sheriff!"

I said, "What happened?" Someway I couldn't scare her by telling her Risueno and the Ranger was conniving. Maybe I was sore myself to think she'd brought this about, by not trusting us men of Snuffbox.

And she said, "I gave Tim Lee his damned old ring back! I wouldn't marry him now if he was the last man on earth. Fooling around with Katie's Mex gal!" She stiffened. Her eyes blazed, her breast heaved. She said, "I hear that gal has been fooling around with every man in Snuffbox!"

And she was right, me remembering the way she'd kissed me and pushed me out! Women are screwy. Sue, she began to cry then, and it took me half an hour to comfort her, and another hour to ride back to Snuffbox, and by that time Tim Lee was drunk as a hoot owl, on account of losing his lady love.

I TOLD the judge, and I told Hobson, the banker, about Risueno and the Ranger hobnobbing. Hobson, he nodded, and he said, "I figured it sort of like that myself. Now tomorrow Sue's draft will come. She'll take the cash. Tomorrow night then, these rannies will try to make their play. Outsiders, messing around Snuffbox. Now here's what we'll do." He leaned over and began whispering. And we agreed to do it, for it sure seemed like a good plan, a way to save Sue Dorgan's cattle, and make old Tim Lee a hero at the same time!

After he finished telling us, the judge got up real easy-like and jerked the curtain aside, the one hanging over the door behind us. Juanita was there. She was pulling up her stockings on her pretty leg. Maybe the judge was going to get her for listening, but he forgot all about it. Because she smiled, and she said, "Dar-leeng!" And she put her arms around him, and she pressed herself up close, just like she had with me, and she kissed him. The judge damn him, he liked it, too. Except Katie Carmichael came in about then and raised plenty of hell.

WELL, sir, we pulled it fine, just like we planned. Sue Dorgan came in and got her eight thousand dollars in cash and went back to her ranch without speaking to any of us. Sue is a fine girl. But none of us went out of our way to speak to her, either! Hadn't she insulted us all, all us men of Snuffbox by calling in a foreigner to straighten out the situation?

Here's how we figured. From what I'd overheard, there by the river, either Luke Jones or Risueno was the leader, one of them, no doubt the Mex, was Digame Smith and the other, the ranger, was working with him. They had their eyes on a gang of cattle, a big herd, which meant they'd have help from Mexico. We figured to take it easy and knock everything over a bit at a time.

Risueno was drinking at the bar. I walked up smiling, and I said, "Mister, you was asking me a lot of questions the other day at my office. I got a little something down there now I believe would interest you. Like to come?"

He made a mistake. He allowed he'd like to. We stepped out on the porch. Hobson the banker let him have it with

a sand-sock. And Tim Lee, giggling, carried him down and put him in the jailhouse. In half an hour the Ranger came into the bar. I told him the same thing, Hobson hit him the same way, and fifteen minutes later we was at the livery stable, mounted and ready to go to the river ranch and pick up the rest of Digame Smith's gang!

Us men of Snuffbox was really on the rampage. No crooked ranger was going to come in there and make fools of us Snuffboxers. And no damn' *Mexicano bandido*, either!

Hobson said, "Now let's don't leave town together, men. Maybe they got spies planted. We'll all take different roads. You, judge, you take the south fork and go clear to the river. And you, Cal, take the north fork by the ford. You, Tim, if them fellows are safely locked up, you can—"

"I'm watching Sue's ranch house," said Tim grimly. "Some of them fellows might get through."

So Hobson, he shrugged. And just then his horse shied and the light from a lantern showed on his face. I said, "My gosh, Hobby, is your mouth bleeding?"

He dabbed at it with a handkerchief and laughed. He said, "Now, that's mouth rouge. I been telling a party goodbye." And we knew damned well who the party was, too—Juanita. Like Sue Dorgan said, that Mex gal really got around!

So we rode off, each of us taking different roads.

DID you ever sit out in a bunch of catclaw and colima on a moonlit night, and listen to the lowing of a herd, and the nightbirds, and the *javelinas* going down to drink? Mister, it's the lonesomest feeling in the world. I got to thinking about the judge, and Tim, and Hobson. And time passed, and passed slow. And pretty soon I heard the shot.

They used to call me Longear when I was a kid. But I'll admit the wind was blowing the right way or I wouldn't have heard that shot. The thing came from the direction of the ranch house. Up I gets, and into the saddle. A shot means trouble. The break was here. Us men was about to do some good, us men of Snuffbox!

I passed the black bunkhouse. Black because this had been payday and all the boys was in town celebrating. There was a light in the ranch house, however, burning bright. I hopped off the horse, went stealing up, and almost fell over Tim Lee.

He wasn't dead, just unconscious, and the blood was oozing out of a shoulder wound. I paused long enough to rip off his shirt and tie it tight, then I went a sneaking toward the house. I went in through a bedroom window. I opened a crack in the living room door and damned near dropped my gun.

The living room was beamed. There was a rope flung over one of the beams, and tied to the end of the rope was Sue Dorgan! Her toes didn't quite touch the floor. In front of her was a brazier of coals, and sticking in the coals was a running iron! She'd fainted, thank the Lord. And right there on her throat was a bright red streak where some devil, Digame Smith?—had touched her with the iron.

Well sir, I jumped in that room fumbling for my knife to cut her down. And a ranny came out of the other room and said, "Ah, I thought I heard you, *señor!*"

He was masked, but it didn't mean nothing. He was holding his gun in his left hand, and he was wearing clothes I'd have known anywhere. I said, "Jose Risueno! How'd you get out of jail? Are you Digame Smith?"

He just said, "Turn around, *señor!*" And the way his eyes sparkled I mean I turned. His gun came up and down—and me, Cal Stroud, I lost all interest.

Bye and bye I came to and found my hands and wrists tied. The Mex *bandido* was talking to Sue. He was saying, "*Señorita*, all night I can wield this running iron, no? And you are so beautiful to be marked." His hand reached out for

(Continued on page 82)

By MAX NEILSON

LOVE'S A

ANGRY voices awakened "Trig" Carson from a spooky dream. Smoky rafters overhead brought sharply to mind that he was back in his old Bar-H bedroom. Back in the big 'obe ranch house where his father had died six years before. Back from riding up Montana way.

Range-trained to shaking the fog of sleep out of his mind when there was quick trouble, Trig pushed his long legs into his town pants. He came erect, listening to jeering oaths. It was the harsh voice of his cousin, "Silk" Worson, in the ranch yard outside.

Without waiting for his shirt, Trig strode, soft-footed into the big room. From the open window, he saw his

HELLION

Illustrated by Frank Volp

Though she hated him, she agreed to marry him to save her father. If she had known he wasn't the man she thought him, that it was a simple case of mistaken identity, she might have reacted differently

cousin Silk standing beside a calico roan. Silk was looking up and swearing at the grizzle-bearded hombre astride the horse.

Trig identified the rider as "Hank" Lamont, the ramrod of the Q-Bee spread which adjoined the Bar-H. Hank had some folding money in his hand and a white paper. But Trig's eyes darted swiftly to the rider of a paint pony who sat close to Hank.

The sun caught this rider's streaming, yellow hair. It made her face look small and impish. It also outlined her curving figure, with firm breast rising and falling with her angry breathing. The girl had mounted hastily for this ride, for she wore a short skirt instead of overalls or breeches.

If she hadn't been with Hank Lamont,

The quirt cut across Silk's face. The girl's horse reared.

Trig couldn't have identified her. But he judged she must be the daughter of old John Laidlaw who owned the Q-Bee.

Trig recalled she had been away at school in the East when his father had died, and he had gone riding in Montana, leaving his cousin Silk to run the Bar-H. Lora Laidlaw had been only a leggy, little girl when Trig had last seen her. From what he could now see, she had turned out to be about the slickest filly he had ever put his eyes upon.

Trig could see Silk Worson's pale eyes avidly upon the girl as he palavered loudly and profanely with Hank Lamont.

"So yuh brung what yuh'd been savin' to pay off part o' Laidlaw's note, huh?" rasped Silk as Trig arrived at the open window. "Yuh damn', locoed has-been! Mebbe so yuh didn't savvy I'd offered to tear up the note, an' let the Q-Bee beef keep on waterin' at the springs, if this high-an'-mighty gal would move her duds over to the Bar-H perm'nent, an' git hitched legal?"

Trig saw Hank stiffen with rage. Trig was getting his own mad up, but he held himself, waiting. He could see four of his cousin's tough, gunnie riders watching from the bars of the horse corral. Trig had arrived by stage only the night before, and he waited, wanting to savvy what all of this meant.

OLD John Laidlaw and Trig's father had watered their cows at the big springs between the ranches for years, peaceably.

It was the girl who spoke next, her words lashing out with contempt for Silk Worson.

"I wouldn't marry you, if you owned the whole range! My father says you stole the Bar-H fom Trig Carson, while he was up in Montana, riding to pay off the mortgage, an' trusting you!"

Her final words were information to Trig. He hadn't found this out, if it were true.

Silk's long riders slouched from the corral, thumbs hooked close to their belted guns. Silk looked up, sneeringly, at the girl's accusing speech.

"So yuh got a mean tongue," snarled Silk, making a quick stride to the side of the paint pony. "But I reckon yuh'll gentle down an' make me a good woman for the Bar-H! Come to think o' it, seein' yuh come ridin' 'thout bein' invited, yuh might as well stay a spell."

Hank Lamont rapped out, "Why, yuh-low-down, yeller belly! I'll l'arn yuh—"

Hank's riding quirt slashed out. It cut across Silk's face and shoulder. Silk's roar of pain and swish of the whip sent the girl's paint pony rearing. The pinto bolted, whirling toward the open gate.

The girl just missed being thrown, but the pony had the bit in his teeth and was jumping into a run.

"Damn yuh to hell!" shouted Silk at Hank Lamont. "Yuh'll never ride onto the Bar-H again! An' yuh're walkin' off it now!"

Trig saw then that Hank wasn't wearing any hardware. For he jerked a rein, evidently intending to head off the runaway pinto. Silk Worson's raging action was too quick for Trig to interfere.

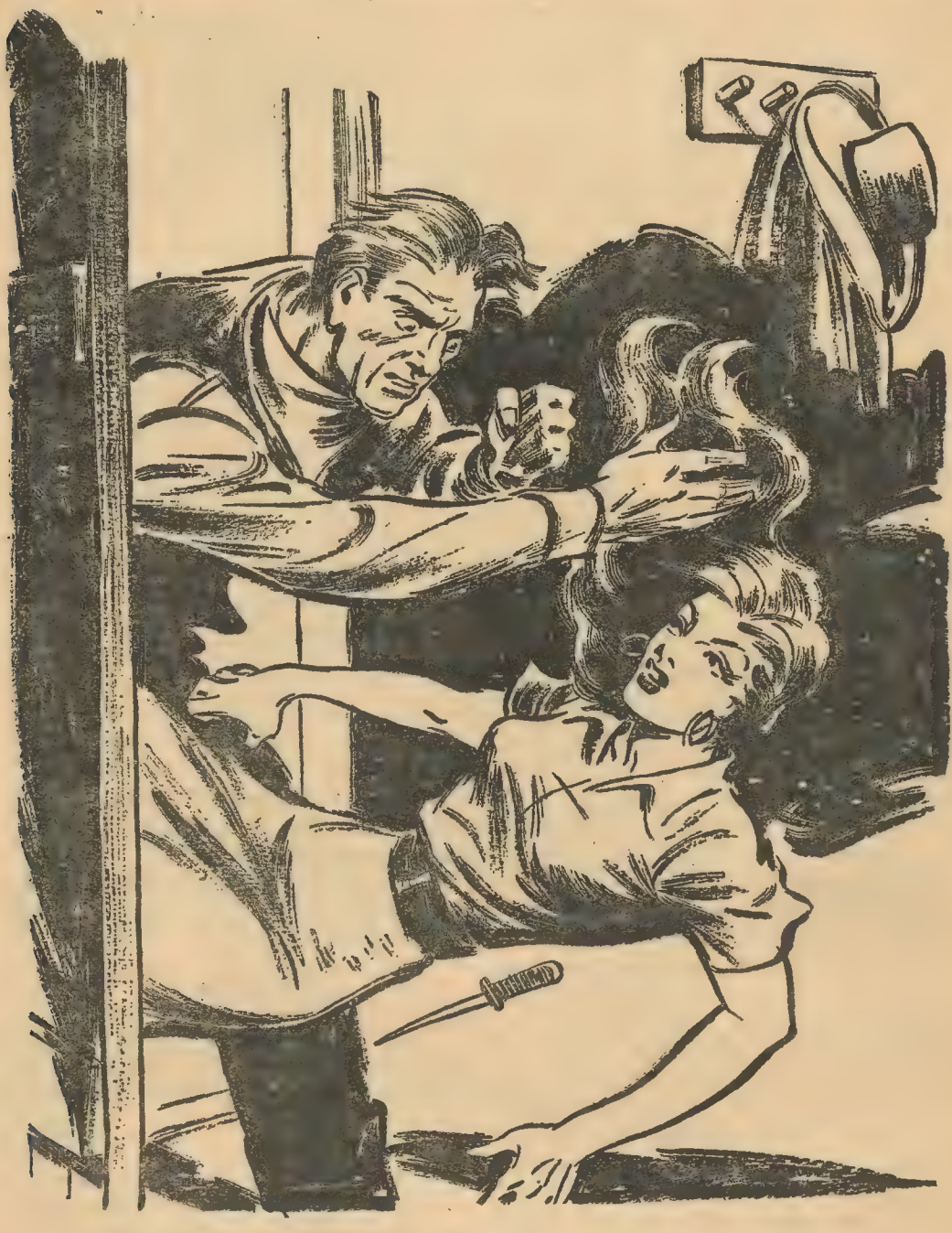
Silk whipped out his pearl-handled .45. He aimed with coldblooded care. Hank's calico roan went down just outside the ranch yard gate. Silk's bullet had broken the horse's leg just above the fetlock.

"An' yuh git the same, yuh pesky old galoot!" yelled Silk at Hank Lamont, as the Q-Bee ramrod landed on the ground, but got up and started to limp away. "If yuh don't move fast, I'll break both yore damn' legs an' make yuh crawl back to John Laidlaw!"

Silk shot again, spinning a bullet close to Hank's feet. The ramrod could do no more than hurry after the girl's running pinto.

The calico roan was down, squealing with pain. A raucous burst of laughter came from Silk's gunmen riders.

"Reckon that'll bring some gunslingin', same as we was hired to do!"



As his fist connected, the knife flew from her hand.

boasted one tough *hombre.* "Wanna shoot the hoss, Silk?"

Trig could almost see the cruel flicker in Silk's pale eyes.

"Let the damn' beast take its time passin' out!" he rasped, rubbing the whip welt across his face. "When old Laidlaw comes bustin' over here, he'll git an eyeful o' what'll happen to some more o' his stock if that damn' gal stays stubborn!"

TRIG had held himself, at first, wanting to round up the whole rumpus before he horned in. There had been no chance then, in the past few

seconds of unexpected action. But Trig moved now, swiftly. He got his father's old Winchester off its peg and snapped back to the window.

As he did, he saw that the Laidlaw girl had her pony under control. She circled, picking up the limping Hank Lamont, and heading southward toward the Q-Bee spread. At this minute, Trig would have rather drilled his cousin than the calico roan.

But he lifted the rifle and sent a slug into the suffering beast's brain. Silk and his tough riders whirled toward the window. Trig calmly levered a fresh shell under the hammer.

"The way I feel, I'd a heap rather it'd been one of you *hombres* than a crippled hoss," drawled Trig. "Reckon I landed back on the Bar H just about in time."

Silk snarled out oaths, but Trig suddenly ignored his cousin. For he heard a shuffling of feet in the next room. Then he saw Conchita, the Mex girl, who, Silk had told him, had been keeping house for him. The Mex girl had crossed the other room, and she was crouching close to the door that Silk must enter.

Conchita apparently had been awakened by the ruckus. She apparently had heard the voice of the other girl. And she must have seen Silk's attempt to pull the girl from the saddle.

Trig had to admit that Conchita was easy on the eyes. He didn't want any part of the red-lipped, sultry-eyed girl.

Trig snapped his gaze back to the ranch yard. Silk's gunnie riders were scowling, looking to him for an order.

"I'll take care o' him!" snarled Silk. "Yuh *hombres* be saddlin' to ride! When Hank Lamont an' that gal git back to the Q-Bee, old Laidlaw's bound to git proddy, an' that's what we want!"

Trig held his tongue, watching Conchita. Silk was striding toward the only door on that side of the house. It was the one beside which the Mex girl was crouching. Conchita undoubtedly had heard and seen all that had taken place outside.

So she was gripping a pointed blade in one brown hand. Her blazing, black eyes were filled with murder. Silk was striding toward the doorway.

Trig saw that Silk's riders were clumping into the horse corral. They were slapping ropes and making too much noise to hear anything that might be happening in the ranch house. Trig put down the rifle and edged toward the other room, just as Silk was entering the door.

"Serve him damn' well right to keep my trap shut," muttered Trig.

But he didn't want to see a Mex knife slitting the gullet of even as low a varmint as his cousin.

"Look out, Silk!" he warned, springing into the doorway, between the rooms. "Your gal's layin' for yuh!"

Conchita hissed a Mex oath and sprang. Trig's dive toward her threw her off balance. The flashing knife grazed Silk's arm.

"Why, yuh greaser hellion!" rasped Silk, quickly driving a fist into the girl's ear.

Conchita went flying backward. She hissed Mex words that wouldn't have been nice in any language.

Trig almost missed the follow-up action of his raging cousin. But Conchita suddenly screamed.

"*Madre Dios!* Don't keel me! Don't shoot me, Seelk!"

Trig whirled on his toes. Silk was bringing his pearl-handled gun into line with Conchita, with death showing in his eyes.

But instead of a roaring shot, there was a dull thump of bone upon bone. The gun slammed to the floor. So did Silk. Trig rubbed his bruised and bleeding knuckles.

Silk, struggling to get up, mouthed, "Damn yuh, Trig! I'll git the both of yuh now!"

TRIG'S eyes were blue and frosty. Conchita was sobbing, her flash of spirit broken. Trig felt downright sorry for her.

"I'm thinkin' I'll hone in on yore neat

His words became a horrible gurgling sound as the knife sank in.

way o' doin' things, Silk," he said. "I come from Montana, 'cause I had a feelin' yuh was runnin' some crooked ranny. I sent you the money to pay the mortgage!"

Silk was up now. They were of even height and resembled each other markedly. Only Silk's eyes were venomously pale, while Trig's were a straight, clear blue.

"All yore *dinero* went into beef that was rustled," sneered Silk. "I paid out the mortgage, an' the deed's made out in my name now."

Trig's voice did not betray the cold rage seeing through him.

"Yuh did that, huh?" he said quietly. "Maybe so, it'll stick. I ain't much up on law, never havin' had no dealin's with a skunk 'fore this time an' minute. But we'll see about that, and when it comes to the Laidlaws, I'm thinkin' I'll be dealin' myself in."

Silk's reply was given with a scorn-

ful grin.

"Yuh been away too long, Trig," he said.

Trig smashed the sneering grin into his cousin's teeth with the hardest straight arm punch he had ever thrown at any *hombre*. And he sealed that punch with a swing of his left that rocked Silk's head and laid him flat upon his back.

This time, Silk Worson didn't get up. He lay inert, his eyes closed.

Trig was thinking fast as to his next move. Outside, Silk's gunnies were saddling to ride. It would mean their meeting an angry but helpless old rancher, and Trig could make a straight guess at the results of that. He decided instantly his first move should be to get to John Laidlaw.

"YOU would take Conchita? I hate heem—I would speet upon him, so!"

The Mex girl did exactly that. She turned quickly back to Trig.

"I weel go weeth you, *Senor* Treeg Carson," she murmured softly. "You are thee brave *hombre*."

Before Trig could step away, she reached up swiftly and clasped her hands behind his neck.

Trig swore and freed her clinging hands roughly.

"You climb into some riding duds," he commanded. "An' if you're smart, you'll light a shuck off the Bar-H 'fore that weasel-brained cousin o' mine comes to his senses. Here's some *dinero* to see you back to El Paso, where you most likely belong."

She slapped the folding money from his hand and hissed at him. "Fool! Peeg!"

"You do as I'm sayin' or I'm ropin' an' hog-tiein' you!" snapped Trig. "You get out an' grab you a nag, an' ride!"

Trig went back into the bigger room. Silk was still sleeping. Trig stepped to the door. The four tough riders had saddled mounts over by the bunkhouse. One was sticking a carbine into his saddle boot. His action bespoke the murder in his mind.

Trig gave a good imitation of Silk Worson's snarling voice.

"Git ridin', yuh *hombres!*" he called out. "Take the Boilin' Creek trail an' come onto the Q-Bee ranch house from the south! I'm ridin' the ridge to meet the ol' coot! Yuh wait till yuh git a sign from me!"

Trig stood, tense, again gripping the Winchester. But his trick worked. The riders swung into their kaks and pounded away. Trig put down the rifle. He went back to his recumbent cousin.

"Now, you pizen varmint, we'll deal a new hand," he muttered.

Five minutes later, Silk Worson was stripped down to his long underwear. Trig had discarded his town clothes. He was of his cousin's size. Except for the clearness of his eyes, he could have been mistaken for Silk anywhere.

Trig pulled on the blue silk shirt that gave his cousin his monicker. For he was the only hombre on Razorback Range who wore such doodads. There was a flaunting silk handkerchief. Trig pulled on the sombrero with the silver woven band. He strapped on the huge silver spurs.

The hand-tooled leather chaps with the silver conchas came next. Last of all, Trig buckled on the carved and studded belt and holster.

Trig worked so fast that he was forking the saddle of Silk's fiddle-footing black gelding before the dust of the four riders had faded over toward oiling Creek. Silk himself was double roped and gagged in a clothes closet.

Trig had to count on Conchita's hitting the trail.

TRIG loped the black gelding along the ridge trail. Intent upon being first to sight John Laidlaw, and his men, if any rode with him, he failed to heed the yellowish, black clouds rolling across the *malpais* off to the west of the ridge. Dusty mesquite slapped at his stirrups here above the watered pasture land.

The storm struck abruptly. A double fork of lightning stabbed along the ridge. In less than five seconds it was followed by the blinding slash of wind-driven dust, mixed with rain and sleet. The ridge was bolted out at a distance of twenty yards or so.

Trig crushed a quirly he had been smoking, and swore.

"Damn my loco idea o' sendin' them gun-slingers on ahead!' he regetted. "Like as not they'll make for the Q-Bee ranch shacks, an' when this storm hits 'em, they'll get proddy! Old John Laidlaw wouldn't nowise be ridin' in this smother!"

Blue flashes lighted the trail ahead intermittently. One lingered longer than the others. And three riders loomed up suddenly like storm ghosts, directly ahead, and coming toward Trig. The lightning showed up Trig as well as the riders.

Trig had one glimpse that picked out the lanky figure of John Laidlaw himself, leading the other riders. He heard Laidlaw's instant shouted warning, because the tearing wind carried the voice to him. Then there were other flashes, mingling with the lightning.

The wind slapped the cracking explosions of guns upon Trig's ears. The black gelding reared, pawed the air, and went to his hindquarters, but he struggled up. Lead struck the saddle horn and burned a shallow wound along Trig's gun arm.

"Hey, Laidlaw!" he yelled. "Easy on the shootin'! You're makin' a mistake! You—"

The storm wind was the wrong way and it slammed the words back into his teeth. Lightning streaks in the beginning of the downpour of rain continued to make Trig a target. He realized then that Laidlaw and his men couldn't hear him, and that he had been mistaken for his cousin.

No doubt Lora Laidlaw had reached the home ranch. And the cowboy whose horse had been shot. The waddy would have told what happened, if the girl hadn't. So old John Laidlaw had come gunning.

"Got to hold 'em back!" grated Trig. "Only it'll be makin' a loco matter worse!"

The black gelding had been wounded along one shoulder and was fighting the bit to turn tail to the storm. Trig emptied his .45, shooting over the heads of the other *hombres*. It checked them for a moment, and Trig let the black gelding take the bit, turn, and start running before the storm.

"The dang' kyoot's turned tail!" came Laidlaw's angry shout. "C'mon! Ride 'im to hell!"

Trig was sure then that Laidlaw's waddy had told all that had happened. Silk Worson's attempt to grab Laidlaw's girl, and his brutal shooting of the Q-Bee horse had boiled the old rancher over. Trig bent low, the guns cracking behind him, his arm numbed from its bullet gouge.

The way his beast jumped, Trig knew lead had scored its haunches. Some of the next slugs were liable to drill into his own back. And the first blinding downpour and wind of the storm were dying some.

If he could only out-distance the Laidlaw riders long enough to make his identity known, Trig could save himself. He was thankful for the storm in one way now, for its crackling thunder and roar kept the sound of the guns from traveling far. If it had been heard by the four gunnie riders of the Bar-H, on their way to the Q-Bee, a death battle would have been precipitated.

IT WAS several minutes before Trig could be sure he was drawing away from his pursuers. It gave him the chance he had been waiting for. He reined the gelding sharply off the ridge trail into the rocks and gullies of the malpais, slowing the horse and picking out a way.

The shooting ceased. Trig heard Laidlaw and his two men sweep by along the ridge, old Laidlaw swearing loudly.

"I ain't keerin' what comes o' it. I'll

l'arn that damn' whelp o' hell t' keep his paws off'n my gal!" were the final words whipped to Trig as Laidlaw went past where he had turned off.

Trig suddenly decided upon what he believed his wisest move. He would back-trail on Laidlaw, reach the Q-Bee ranch house, and make his identity known to Lora Laidlaw. That way, he could also head off Silk Worson's hired gunmen.

"I'll teach them long riders a lesson they won't be forgettin' soon," he muttered grimly. "An' by the time I finish with Silk, he'll be findin' the old Bar-H spread too hot to hold!"

The black gelding was limping, but still on its feet. Trig got back to the trail, again took the diminishing storm wind and rain in his face, and headed for the Q-Bee. He could see farther now. Possibly fifty yards away, another rider flashed into view.

Dress flying in the wind, her head up and her face showing wet with rain, came a girl.

"That damn' Conchita!" swore Trig. "The Mex hellion would hafta get herself mixed up in this! I'm bettin' the locoed Mex was trailin' me and—"

The other horse was coming fast. Because of the slashing rain, Trig's view was not clear as he spurred the gelding forward, bending his head to shield his eyes. The girl apparently saw him and attempted to pull up her mount.

Trig's lean hand shot out, trapped the rein, and the two nags whirled with an impact that pulled him from the saddle. Trig hung onto the leather, but struck the ground with a force that drove out his breath and half stunned him.

THERE in that rain, Trig closed his eyes and opened them again. He judged he must have been suddenly knocked loco for sure. He was looking into the nicest gray eyes he had ever seen. A pretty, oval face with a firmly rounded chin, and kissable red lips, now drawn a little tight, made up some more of the crazy picture in Trig's dazed mind.

Her thin dress skirt was torn, and her legs were spattered some with mud from her riding. Trig was hanging onto the reins of both horses, and the girl was standing beside him. He started to speak, but the girl was quicker.

"If you're not too badly hurt to listen, Silk Worson, I come riding to accept your proposition," she said in a tense, low voice that sent the blood pounding to Trig's temples. "If you're willing to let my father save his cattle, and give him more time, I'll go with you now." She added then, "Before there's a killing."

She was close to him. Trig realized instantly that Lora Laidlaw had just come from a school in the East. Her clear accent proved it. Probably she had seen Silk Worson but once, and the resemblance was so close that, in Silk's clothes, she had mistaken him for his cousin.

"But I—"

The pounding of hoofs sounded from toward the Q-Bee.

"Only you've got to stop your riders, the killers you sent to get my father this morning!" the girl cried out. "They saw me come after my father, and they're trailing me!"

Trig's gun was empty in its holster. If Silk's gunmen came upon him here and now, he was virtually helpless. Lora Laidlaw would discover her mistake quickly enough, but Silk's riders would find out how they had been tricked at the same time.

"On your pony!" rapped out Trig, catching the girl and almost throwing her into her saddle. "We're high-tailin' pronto!"

"But your men?" cried the girl. "They'll—

Trig wasn't listening. He had to fork his horse quickly, even if he was dizzy. Quick, angry yells sounded as he got the horses moving. And among them rang out the snarling voice of Silk Worson himself.

"There she is! Yuh fools! Why'd yuh

let the damn' filly git out?"

While Trig identified his cousin's voice, he was fairly sure that Lora Laidlaw had not known Silk well enough to separate it from the shouts of the other men.

"That Conchita hellion!" muttered Trig. "I'll bet the damn' Mex jumpin' bean had another change o' heart an' turned Silk loose!"

Trig pulled the horses off the trail, back into the badlands of rocks and gullies. He judged this would be their only chance to lose Silk and his gunnies. He kept a tight grip on the rein of the girl's pony.

But they had been seen. Guns cracked in the rain. Trig had the thought that this new shooting probably would bring old John Laidlaw and his men riding back. It would be the old rancher and but two riders against Silk and his quartet of hired gun-slingers.

Trig figured he must stop Silk some way. He pulled up among the rocks, rapping out, "You ride on! Keep the rain at your back, an' you'll come onto a line cabin in about a mile!"

He let go the rein of Lora's pony, slapped his 'brero over the nag's flank. The pony jumped away and Trig started to slip shells into an empty cylinder.

WHAT followed was a dim nightmare. First, Trig thought Silk and his riders were rushing into the malpais, coming upon them. But his own horse was moving, and he was lying forward, hanging onto leather to keep from toppling.

Next, Trig was aware his horse was being led by another rider. His innards were too empty and sick to enable him to make out who the rider might be. His face seemed sticky with blood. He still heard shooting, but it died out, or the blindness of unconsciousness kept it from his ears.

A little later, Trig was vaguely conscious that his horse was being led directly into the door of a cabin, and his numbed mind told him it was the line shack. He let go completely then, or his senses did.

TRIG was a little sick inside, and his head pounded as he opened his eyes. He was lying in a bunk. A wood fire was giving light in the fireplace.

He had the queer sensation that the line cabin had suddenly become heaven, or something like it. For the girl's figure outlined by the fire was about as near to being an angel's as any Trig had ever seen.

Trig raised his hand, and discovered some silk thing had been used for a bandage. The girl evidently saw the movement. She came walking toward him.

"You feeling better, Silk Worson?" she said, a little catch in her voice. "There's only a nick along your head. Maybe if I'd taken your gun and killed you, it would have been better. But I couldn't do it."

Trig discovered his dry, rasping tongue would make only incoherent, guttural sounds. He couldn't shape words.

The girl said, "Can you remember I told you I was accepting your proposition? I know my father wouldn't let me marry you, but if I stay here with you, and go away with you, I'll convince him that I did it of my own free will because I loved you."

"Good God!" croaked Trig at last. "You meanin' you'd—?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" the girl cut in. "And all I ask is that you get to your killers as soon as you're able to ride and call off this range war. You don't have to explain about me—not yet. I'll be waiting here for you. I give my word."

The girl's eyes were calm and steady as the firelight played upon them. Her hair looked like spun gold against the blaze. The surrender, the sacrifice she deliberately intended to make to save her father, seemed to make it a halo of glory. The rounded chin was proudly, defiantly lifted, as if she were beating back a feeling of loathing for the man to whom she was offering herself.

"Well, I'll be damned!" was forced from Trig's dry lips, as the girl's words became a powerful tonic.

He lifted himself suddenly. He could not avoid recalling with grim humor that this had somehow turned out to be about the biggest day in all of his hard riding life.

All at once he was flooded with the damnedest, loco feeling he had ever had. He almost forgot that he wasn't Silk Worson. All his dizzied brain could tell now was that he loved this girl, and he could see that deep trouble was in the eyes that had seemed so calm.

It was loco, too, that just at this minute he didn't want to disclose his real identity. He had the mad thought, she's willing to marry Silk to save her father, and she thinks I'm him, so—

He might have been Silk himself, the way he caught the girl abruptly in his arms, crushing her to him. He sought her lips with a kiss that bruised her mouth, for she gasped, and her lips were cold and rigid with resistance.

But they were cold, and they resisted him but a few seconds. It was as if the real character of Trig Carson was in that kiss. Something compelling, that became more than any words he could have uttered to change Lora Laidlaw from a blindly loyal girl to a suddenly thrilling and trembling woman.

NOW Trig hadn't intended it to be this way at all. And it was certain that the girl could have had nothing but hate in her heart for the *hombre* she believed him to be, for hadn't she said shortly before that she had wanted to kill him, but couldn't?

Her mouth no longer resisted his kiss. Instead, there was a long sigh of madness that was partly sobbing amazement at herself.

She freed herself, but not entirely, her gray eyes searching his face with a wondering scrutiny.

"God in heaven," she whispered huskily. "I didn't know—I never imagined —Silk Worson—if I had only known you—"

"But, yuh don't!"

The harsh, rasping words snarled through the firelit cabin. Trig's spine went cold as he released Lora and whirled.

"So, my sanctified cousin, yuh run a ranny on me, huh?"

Silk Worson stood in the line shack doorway, flanked by two of his hard-eyed gunnies.

Silk was dressed almost as usual, lacking his gun belt, his fine leather chaps and his silver banded sombrero, but there was no mistaking him now. Lora's eyes went from him back to Trig. Her hand held back a cry as she clamped it against her teeth.

"An' so yuh're too high an' mighty t' hitch up with me, huh?" snarled Silk. "Yuh cheap, little—"

Trig uttered no sound. He ignored the guns held level with the waists of the two Bar-H riders as he hurled himself forward. He had been weakened by his head wound, but the fire pouring like molten metal through his veins took care of that.

Bone crunched on bone, as Trig's fist blurred against Silk's chin. His movement and the blow were so fast that both gunnies were paralyzed for the second or two, and Silk slammed back into them with a howling oath.

The seething madness of Trig drove him sideways upon one of the gunnies. He used a hard boot toe on the gunine's shin, as his hand wrapped down upon the wrist of the hand holding the .45. The gunnie groaned, bent, and his weapon dropped.

"Oh! Look out!"

The cry came from the girl. Her warning was too late. The second gunnie slammed the barrel of his .45 across the back of Trig's skull. The cabin room whirled before Trig's eyes and the blazing fire seemed to strike into his brain. He went down into blackness.

"SO YUH was thinkin' it was Silk Worson yuh was wastin' yore kisses on, damn' yuh!"

Trig heard the brutal speech spill

from Silk's foul tongue. Trig was flat on the floor. The two gunnies were standing close to him, but they were looking with fascinated eyes at Silk Worson. Trig heard the girl's sobbing breath, her words.

"No—no—let me go! I meant to marry you—I still will—to save my father—oh, God!"

Trig's marrow ran icy. Lora was in Silk's savagely crushing arms. Trig fought the numbness that held him.

"Oh God—don't—!"

She cried out again. The gunman had no eyes for Trig now. But Trig's effort to move brought only blinding pain over his eyes. He closed them to shut out the sight that was squeezing the heart out of him.

There was a combined oath and grunts from both of the gunnies. There was a quick, dull sound as of a blow being struck. Silk's voice arose. He said, "Why — why — you — damn yuh — Conchita! Yuh Mex hellion—yuh—!"

His words became a horrible, gurgling sound. Trig's eyes snapped open. Lora had fallen to the floor, where she was staring with wide, terror-filled eyes.

And Silk Worson was falling to his knees, then to his hands, and last of all to his face. The glistening, white bone haft of a knife stuck out of his silk shirt between his shoulder blades.

One of the gunnies snatched his gun and fired from the hip.

Conchita, her black hair flying about her pretty face, now like a terrible mask of hatred, stood in the doorway. The gunnie fired the second time, and Conchita was looking down at Trig. She jerked her arms a little at that second shot, put her hand upon the side of the door.

"*Senor* Treeg—" The words were a bubbling whisper. You was so good to me—*Madre Dios!*"

As Conchita fell, it seemed to Trig that she cleared the way for avenging six-guns that cracked outside. The gunnie who had killed Conchita lurched and fell. The other *hombre* fired once through the doorway, but that was all. Lead hammered into his stomach.

"LORA! In God's name, what in tunket does this mean? Trig? Trig Carson? Wall, I'll be teetotally—Lora! What yuh doin' here!"

Speech tumbled incoherently through the gray, walrus mustache of old John Laidlaw. Backed by two of his men, Laidlaw stood in the cabin. They had gunned down two of Silk Worson's long riders outside.

Trig heard Lora whisper, "Trig Carson? So you weren't—?"

He could hear very well, for Lora's arms were around his head, and she was pillowing his cheek against her.

"No, I wasn't Silk Worson," said Trig. "I didn't get much of a chance to ex—"

"Be quiet," the girl whispered. "Dad must never know. He—"

"What in all tarnation are yuh two whisperin' about?" demanded old John. "An, Lora, yuh oughter be downright 'shamed o' yoreself!"

Trig found the strength at last to sit up.

"I've blown in from Montana to stay, John Laidlaw," he said with a grim smile. "I don't reckon you'll have any trouble hereafter watering your cows. Seems as if we ought-a kind o' hitch the Q-Bee and the Bar-H together, soon's as I find a wrongful deed, an' a note you're owin', an' tear 'em up. Prob'ly won't be able to get around to it though until Lora puts on weddin' clothes."

For Stories with Action, Human Interest, and All-Around Entertainment, You Can't Go Wrong with the SPEED MAGAZINES!

By WILLIAM DECATUR

Illustrated by Newton H. Alfred

The sound of gunfire and the pounding of a horse's hooves startled her.

THERE were four of the Baines originally, but Daniel, next to the youngest, had left the valley years before. Some said he roamed the seven seas, others said he had married a Mexican girl and joined the Mexican army. All that was actually known was that he had gradually faded from memory, until folks in town always spoke of "three Baines" rather than four. Except that the Baines themselves knew.

The sun was well above the jagged escarpment that marked the valley's eastern boundary when the three Baines, hastily summoned by a *vaquero*, rode out of the south and saw the barbed wire, sat their saddles, and peered at it aghast. These three were Shadrach, Moses, and Samuel, cast in the same

For years Abe Freeman and the Baines brothers had been friendly neighbors, but now the small matter of a hundred yards of fence had them at each others' throats in a bitter, killing war

GET YOUR GUN

mold, tempered in the same furnace: three tall, quiet men with fierce black eyes and thin mouths, men who kept to themselves because the old Tennessee clan spirit was stronger in their wide chests than the desire to whoop it up and carouse in the neighboring towns. The Baines were like that.

Shad grinned. This spot was Dos Aguas. For the past seven years the Baines cattle had watered at one of the two holes, either one, mixing with the cattle of Abe Freeman, that mighty man of cattle and land who owned the acres flowing widely to the north. Never had there been trouble. A surveyor's line would have shown the mark between the two ranches to have been almost exactly half way between the two watering holes. What few Freeman critters strayed on the Baines Open Triangle were always returned at roundup time, and the same thing held good for Triangle cattle wandering north. Now out of a clear sky this! A barbed wire fence separating the two holes!

Again Shad, the oldest Baines, grinned. "Don't reckon this country has got another foot of wire," he said. "And why a man would put up a scant hundred yards beats me!"

Mose Baines shook his head, as puzzled as his elder brother. But Sam, the youngest, cursed viciously. his features

beet red, his strong hand gripping a gunbutt. "Damn him for a high-handed old fool!" he cried. "It's a fighting insult, a slap in the face!"

It was long moments before the other two could get the story from him, for the Baines were not talkers.

ABE FREEMAN had a daughter, Lila. From time to time Sam Baines had seen her in town, always with Dorsey Stevens, the Rocking F foreman. Never once, he admitted, had he so much as spoken to her. Yet the thought of her lithe young beauty, the lilting grace of her carriage, had inflamed him. Any other man would have made her acquaintance, but not a Baines. The Baines boys were old-fashioned, Tennessee old-fashioned. Sam Baines had slicked himself up and gone to see old Abe Freeman first.

He described the scene for the edification of his brothers, how Abe Freeman's face had darkened, how he had talked about blood and breeding, a family tree traced back to Norman England.

"What'd you tell him?" asked Shad mildly.

"I told him," grated Sam, "that us Baines boys had as good a blood as any man in this here state, and that we *kept* it pure, that we kept it untainted!"

Shad winced, picturing the scene. For Abe Freeman had recently scandalized the county by returning from below the line with a Mexican wife. True enough, Muriel Freeman was beautiful, but she was undoubtedly Mexican. "Go on," said Shad grimly.

Sam's grin wasn't nice to see. "Him and that Dorsey threw down on me and made me hit the trail. Told me they didn't want no truck with trash and that if I ever set foot on the Rocking F, they'd throw lead! And now don't you see, that danged fence don't mean a thing! A hundred yards of fence never kept cattle apart! It's a slap in the face, a chip on his shoulder! Old Freeman is daring us to start trouble!"

His two brothers sat silent, turning it over in their minds. Impatiently Sam spurred his horse forward. "I'll show him," he called back over his shoulder. "To hell with him!"

At the fence, his brothers watching a hundred yards distant, Sam Baines slid from his pony. He took the muzzle of his sixgun, began hammering at the top strand of the wire with the butt. Seemingly from an infinite distance came the flat crack of a rifle. Neither brother saw the puff of smoke. But they saw young Sam, whose only fault had been loving Lila Freeman from afar, pitch backward, try desperately to get up, then settle back and remain motionless. He had been shot cleanly through the head.

It was noon when they bore him home, their search of the rocky *mesa* on the Freeman side of the fence having proved fruitless.

DORSEY STEVENS, foreman of the Rocking F, was not a good man. But he was shrewd, and he was capable, and above all, he was handsome. He saw, in Lila Freeman, not a beautiful young girl on the verge of womanhood, but he saw in her a way to get Dorsey Stevens' cut of the Freeman property. Lila, young and impressionable, could not know this. She knew only that a handsome, roistering man, typical of the west, was in love with her, that his eyes swept over her boldly and arrogantly, making her blood course madly through her veins.

And because of this, because she was young and inexperienced, she convinced herself that she was in love with him.

The night he asked her to marry him they sat alone in a candlelit room off her father's library in the Rocking F ranch house. Dorsey was to the point, he read the expression in her eyes. He knew the time had come. He asked her to be his wife and reached for her. There in the dim light she came into his arms. If he laughed to himself at her childishness and inexperience she did not know it.

"Put 'em up, you traitor," she cried.

SOMETHING crashed in her father's library. Afterward she knew it was his overturned chair. His voice boomed out, "You come here, you damned Baines, you dare come here to my own ranch and call me a liar to my face! By the Eternal, I'll—!"

"You'll what!" The answering voice of Shad Baines held the deadliness of the cobra about to strike. "My brother came here like a gentleman, with a gentleman's request and you laughed at him and threw him off your property. You put up a hundred yards of barbed wire fence to egg him on. And you had a rifle man up in the *malpais* to knock him off when he touched it. So you'll what, old hellion! Go for your gun! Tell me you never put up no fence! I'll tell you again, you're a liar, damn you, a liar!"

Dorsey Stevens slid the girl softly out of his arms. His six gun was in his hand as he cat-footed toward the thick curtain. The killer's light was in his eye. Lila Freeman pressed her hand to

her mouth. Voices raged in the libray. She saw Dorsey pull back the curtain, saw the brighter light gleam on his crafty face, and she was afraid. His thumb drew back the hammer of his gun. But it never fell. A shot cracked from the other room. Dorsey reeled backward, his gun falling to the floor. Other shots followed.

Somehow she was in the library then, leaping Dorsey Stevens' dead body, to find her father collapsed in a chair, holding a shattered arm, a desk drawer open, revealing a big Colt which he had never had time to grasp. Shad Baines and Mose Baines, tall and grim and white-lipped, stony eyed, stared at her as if she were a creature from another world. Smoke curled from their gun muzzles.

Shad sneered, "An act, hanh. A man of yours hiding behind a curtain to drygulch us like poor Sam was gulched. I'm sorry I didn't kill you, old man. Next time I will."

Abe Freeman was no coward. No one had ever called him fearful. His voice was strained. "You're asking for it, Baines. You tell me I put up a fence and had your brother drygulched. To hell with you! If that's the way you want it, that's the way you get it. Let that fence be the boundary, but don't think I can't see through your land-grabbing schemes. I been watching you ignorant low-landers grow for a long time. I'm calling. Touch that fence and I'll ride your puny little ranch right off the map."

Lila could see the unmoving bootheels of the man she had promised to marry. Her face was twisted, her eyes dry, her voice as hard as her father's. "We'll ride you off anyway! Do you understand, this is war!" She wheeled to her father. "I don't care what you intend doing, I'm telling you now I'll never stop till the last Baines is dead!"

THE Baines brothers, the two of them, rode warily home through the moonlight. Shad spoke once, on their own property. "War, is it? All right, Mose, they can have it. You ride into town in the morning and see Solo Kilgore. Tell him we want a crew of hard-riding, hard-fighting gun-men. Reckon we'll show high and mighty Freeman a thing or two. The Baines don't have to back water, the ambushin' son of a sea cook!"

A Rocking F cowhand was riding, almost at the same time, into the town of Ligero, bound on two errands. The first was to summon a doctor to set Freeman's shattered arm. The second was to carry word to the slim little vulture-nosed gambler who was boss of the town. The word was that Abe Freeman was hiring gun-hands, men who liked the smell of powder. The gambler was Solo Kilgore.

And so the Blando County wire war started—over one hundred yards of wire.

TWO weeks later Abe Freeman, stern-visaged, deep-eyed, sat in conference in the bank office with Simmons the banker and Solo Kilgore. Bitterly Freeman continued his harangue. "Damn it, Kilgore, you've sent me twenty killers, the scourings of the border, and what does it get me? The Baines are still there! Three or four men have been killed, picked off, shot in the back, but every time it comes to a showdown, a face to face meeting, something happens. That Pete Welch I'm paying a hundred a month to! A gunslick I grant you, but cautious, too damned cautious! Always counseling wait—wait—wait!" He slammed the desk with his fist. "Action, I want action! Every day I'm losing cattle. Them damned Baines are stripping me little by little. Two months from now when time comes for me to deliver my government cattle, I'll be a ruined man! I'm borrowing eight thousand from Simmons today to meet my payroll!"

The skinny little gambler and town boss, Solo Kilgore, scratched his long nose reflectively, wiped his bald pate with a silk handkerchief.

Dan went down with a bullet in his shoulder, and Shad sprang instantly to his side.

"What do you want me to do, Abe?" he whined.

Again Abe Freeman slapped the desk. "Get me some fighters that will fight. To hell with the law! To hell with this beating around the bush! I'll wipe those rustlers and drygulchers off the map, then I'll have peace."

He got up and stalked from the bank. Solo grinned at Simmons, the banker. Simmons said, "For the love of heaven, Solo, count me out. Abe and I were boys together, back in Virginia."

Solo Kilgore's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared, the rasp of his breathing was audible there in the office. "You'll do what I say, Simmons, or I'll put you behind steel bars. I own this town, me, Solo Kilgore! I came here as a bum, a tramp, and I swamped in a saloon. I got to be a tinhorn gambler. The good people of this country looked

down on me; the women drew their skirts aside when I passed. I won't forget that, Simmons! Now I own the town, lock, stock and barrel. And I'm going to own the whole damned county. I'm going to marry me one of those proud, blooded women, Simmons! And I'll lead her a dog's life, I'll teach 'em what it means to draw their skirts aside when Solo Kilgore passes!"

SHAD BAINES awaited him in his saloon, a finer-drawn, grimmer Baines. He cornered Solo in his office, leaned over the desk, and glared down at him. Slowly and distinctly he said to Solo, "To hell with you and your help, Solo! You've sent us nothing but yellow-bellied snakes, afraid to fight! I threw that last Mex off the place this morning."

Solo looked pained. He whined, "Shad, I've just been trying to help you. You asked me to get you men with a fighting reputation. I wrote El Paso, I wrote Tombstone, and all points in between. You can't fight Abe Freeman by yourself!"

"And I can't afford to fight him the way you want me to fight him! I got to borrow money today from the bank; I got to put another mortgage on the Open Triangle, because I can't stop fighting Freeman long enough to run my beef out of the hills and fill my contracts. It's a damned funny thing about this war, anyway. Right from the start Freeman has claimed he didn't put up that fence. He tells it that we Baines put it up and are using it for an excuse to try to whip him. This county don't like fences, Solo."

Solo shrugged. "There it is. If Freeman didn't put it up how come it means death for a Triangle man to touch it? You're licked, Shad," he taunted.

Shad laughed in his face. "Licked? The hell! We've got rid of all the yellow-bellied gunmen *you* sent us. There'll be another Baines along in a few days. We writ Dan, and he'll be here. Three Baines is enough to whip any damned outfit of smoke-eaters that ever was."

When he had gone, Solo sat deep in thought, a little crease between his eyes. Presently he called Manuel Flores, his right hand man. They talked long, talk interspersed with many *"si-si's"* from the scar faced Mexican. Manuel went from the saloon to the stable where he kept his horse, and rode away in the direction Shad Baines would take. Solo Kilgore was afraid Shad was growing suspicious. Consequently when Shad Baines reached home and safety that night he was reeling in the saddle, blood still ebbing from a rifle bullet embedded in his shoulder. Flores always shot from a safe distance!

THE two women of the Freeman household changed almost completely. Muriel Freeman, who had been a Gonzalez of San Luis Potosi before marriage to the arrogant ranchman, became embittered. Muriel had considered Abe Freeman with his broad lands and many cattle, a great catch. And the elderly ranchman, swept away by the charms of the Mexican woman, had, at first been a romantic lover. Nothing had been too good for her. He bought her jewels and silks for adornment, expensive scents and perfumes. This was the life she loved, and craved. Now with the Fence War, she was forgotten.

Her husband seemed an old and cruel monster, unfeeling, no longer thrilled by the beauty of his young wife. Consequently she turned to the others, coquetted—and more—with the crew of gunfighters brought in by her husband.

Lila Freeman grew from girlhood to womanhood in a few short weeks. Nights, when she lay in her bed, she stared wide-eyed in the darkness and built up a vision of Dorsey Stevens. Not as he really was, but as she imagined him to be. And she hated the name Baines! Extermination of that hated race became a mania with her. Day after day she rode out to the high hills surrounding Dos Aquas, the twin water holes. The fence became a symbol to her. She spent hours, concealed in those hills, the carbine in her hands, hoping

and praying for sight of one of the men who had caused the death of her sweetheart.

RAIN came to Blando county infrequently, but when it came, it was torrential. That morning, after the storm, was hot and fair, the sky cloudless, the sun relentless when she took her place high in the rocks. Below her were the waterholes and the fence. A grey hawk hung aloft in the air. But there was no sign of human activity. Restlessly she stared about. Great pools of rain water, formed in the rock basins, steamed in the sun. As it grew hotter and hotter, as an aftermath of the storm, she drew off her boots, preened herself, and waded into the pool.

She paused, listened again to make sure. From the distance came the undeniable sound of rifle fire. She waded hurriedly from the pool, seized her carbine and looked to the south. A man on a black horse, no larger in the distance than an ant, galloped wildly toward the waterholes. Spread out behind him, fan fashion, four riders pursued. From time to time a little puff of smoke, followed in seconds by the sound of the report, indicated rifle fire. As they came nearer—yet too far for recognition—she saw their prey could hardly hope for escape. Two of the pursuers, evidently on fresher horses, were cutting him off to the west, gradually pushing him back, it seemed to her, toward the Open Triangle.

They were on Baines' property. Evidently the man, then, was running from Baines' supporters. Any man who fought the Baines was a natural friend of Lila Freeman. She leveled the carbine over a boulder, pressed the butt against her bare shoulder, sighted down the short barrel and squeezed the trigger. A hat flew from the head of the foremost pursuer. His horse slid on its haunches as a startled face was turned toward the rocks. She levered in another shell. Again the carbine spat. A horse went down, its rider lighting running. A second pursuer pulled up, snapped a shot at the rocks.

The prey of the Baines' slowly began to draw away, but his horse was through, seemed scarcely able to keep its feet. The rider reeled in the saddle. Again and again Lila's carbine sent its lethal lead hurtling downward. The pursuers, unaware that they faced only a girl, drew back, bewildered.

And when an apparition, a ghost, came whooping defiantly down the rocks backing a red horse, waving a carbine over a head of blonde hair, it proved too much. They turned and ran for it!

DAN BAINES, the prey who had escaped the trap, worn out by a long hard trip, nicked in the shoulder by a bullet from the ambuscade, felt himself slipping. His weary horse waded into the waterhole. He reeled from the saddle, splashed into the water. Its coolness revived him. Strangling from choking he staggered to his feet in the knee deep spring-pool. His eyes bulged. His mouth dropped open.

Standing in the stirrups of a panting horse, waving a carbine above her head and shrieking like a Comanche after the disappearing riders, Lila Freeman was gloating in her victory. Dan Baines gulped.

She laughed triumphantly. "We got them, partner," she shrilled. "The damned Baines never could whip a Freeman, even a girl!" And then she saw the boldness of his black eyes as they swept over her. She slid uneasily from the saddle, kept the horse between them. "Who are you?" she demanded, leveling the carbine. "And why were the Baines chasing you?"

Dan Baines thought swiftly. She was a Freeman, he knew that from her words. He remembered her only faintly as a small girl, years before. He knew he had changed greatly in appearance, that a great scar transversed his right cheek, that the typical beaklike Baines nose had been broken several times. No one would suspect him of being a Baines.

At that moment, no thought of spy-

ing had entered his mind. He simply wished to talk to a Freeman woman, and knew if he told her that he was Dan Baines, she might shoot. So he used a name he had used years before.

"My name's Brown, Dan Brown, ma'am," he said gravely. "I rode up from Mexico because I heard there was a fence war up here and a man could make a living with his guns."

"Dan Brown!" she exclaimed.

"Say, partner, you're in the right place. We have a man riding for us named Pete Welch that tells some tall stories about you." He liked her giggle, liked the flush that overspread her face as she sheathed the carbine. "You got a job, if you can shoot, and if you want to get even with the Baines family."

In that brief moment Dan Baines knew he was going to play the part of spy!

PETE WELCH knew him as Dan Brown, and Pete Welch was loud-mouthed. He was glad to see Brown, or Baines, if you will, and it was from Welch that Dan heard most of the story. In the letter he had received from his brother Shad, he heard that Abe Freeman had put up the fence, that Abe Freeman's men had gunned young Sam Baines, and persisted in carrying on the war. Shad told him that Freeman was even running off all the Open Triangle stock he could come in contact with.

So his amazement was great when he learned from the garrulous Welch that Freeman accused the ambitious Baines brothers of putting up the wire. That he accused them of doing it so it would be attributed to Freeman, would sway public opinion against the land baron. He also claimed that one of their own hired gunmen had shot Sam Baines in order to precipitate the inevitable war.

Which was, he decided, a damned funny thing. Each ranch claiming the other put up the fence. And while each ranch was an armed camp, patrolling its boundaries, each was being stripped of its cattle and accusing the other of doing the rustling.

Muriel Freeman saw the thing she craved in the wide-shouldered Dan Brown. He, of course, heard the stories circulating about among the men. So, on the third morning, when she summoned him, alone, to help her mount a horse, he was almost prepared—but not quite. He held her stirrup. She thrust a slimbooted foot in it, grasped the horn, and at the same time flicked the horse with her quirt. The horse jumped. She fell backward in Dan's arms with a little shriek.

Muriel Freeman was not used to what followed. She knew her warm arm was about his neck, knew that her eyes were veiled, her lips half parted tremulously. Yet this man, stony-faced, put her on the ground and smiled impudently. She reddened. "Are you a man?" she taunted.

"Yes ma'am," he answered gravely, "I'm a man. And you're a woman. A married woman."

Instead of riding, she turned and walked back toward the house. Without a word, he took the saddle from the horse, and when she looked back, he was laughing—scornfully. A great hate was born in her heart. And, as is so often the case, she ached for a revenge that would bring him crawling and cringing and pleading for mercy to her knees. "That one," she told herself, trembling with anger, "that one will bear much watching."

SHE WAS not deliberately spying on Dan Brown two nights later when she saw the thing that led to his secret. Rather she had had a vicious quarrel with her husband, and could not sleep. She was in the *patio*, peering out hot-eyed and angry when she saw Dan tip-toeing into the moonlight from the bunk-house, his boots in his hand. She stole through the shadows and watched him silently rope a horse from the corral, throw the saddle on its back, and walk him away into the night. She glowed inwardly. No man bound on a legiti-

mate errand would creep and slink like that! She went back into the house with fresh fire in her stride.

AT THE Open Triangle unbelieving hostility was Dan's reception. To begin with, he was several days late. Shad, with his wounded arm, was surly and accusing—always the elder brother. He listened to Dan's tale and spat into the fireplace.

"You're a fool!" he said, viciously. "That girl has got you wrapped around her finger. They put up that fence themselves, damn 'em! They killed Sam when he touched it; they've killed two other rannies that worked for us. About you being chased, I don't know. Certainly no Open Triangle men chased you, 'cause there's nobody here but me and Mose now, we fired the rest of the yellow-bellied snakes that Solo Kilgore sent us. Some of their own men chased you, Dan, and the girl mistook 'em at that distance." Painfully, with his one good hand, he rolled a cigarette. Brother Mose took it up bitterly.

"It'll soon be settled, one way or another," he opined, "now that Danny's here. We'll get action."

"What do you intend doing?" Somehow, thinking of Lila's hatred as well as the hatred of his brothers, he was suddenly afraid. For all of them.

"Three Baines," snapped Shad, "can whip all the hired smoke-eaters this side of hell. We'll ride over there, the three of us, with plenty of shells and smoke them out. I'm tired of this bushwhacking, this dry-gulching. We'll get action, and we'll get it tomorrow night."

Dan shook his head slowly. "I'm riding back to the Rocking F," he said slowly. Shad's face went stony. Mose looked at him in disbelief. A Baines playing the part of a spy? It was incredible to them. Yet the Baines did not argue. Dan went on. "Something is funny here. Did you know Abe Freeman is losing as many cattle as you lose? He's had to borow the same as you've had to borrow. Both of you claim you didn't put up the fence. There's something else behind all this beside Abe Freeman thinking thinking Brother Sam wasn't good enough for his daughter Lila. And when I find out—!"

He started unwillingly toward the door. Shad's thin voice boomed after him. "Stuff and nonsense! Don't walk out that door and leave us to fight alone, Dan. You was always ma's favorite, but you're a different stripe than the rest of us. Don't make us believe that stripe is yellow."

Stubbornly Dan answered, "I'm not going off half-cocked. I'm going to get to the bottom of this fence war if it's the last thing I do." He walked out alone into the night, followed by grim looks and implacable silence.

All the way to the town of Ligero he was wrapped in thought. Ligero was quiet that night, for a cowtown; it was a few days after payday and long ago the cowboys had gone broke. The little railway station stood half a mile from the town. Dan Baines went in through the darkened window. Among his other accomplishments Baines was a telegraph operator—and a man of good memory. He knew that a certain hardware house in San Antonio controlled Blando county's purchases almost completely. He sat down at the key, clicked out his message, and when the operator on the other end asked, ticked out the information that there was no signature needed. The telegram, to the hardware house, read: "Barbed wire sample all right stop. Rush fast express fifty spools same addressed Wahoo Junction."

NEXT morning Muriel Freeman waited until the hired riders, including Dan, had gone to their work of riding, repairing and vigilance. No one saw her go to the ranch house, no one saw her searching Dan Brown's warbag. There she found the letter addressed to Dan Baines, signed by Shadrach Baines, asking him to come to the assistance of his brothers in the Blando County Fence War! She bided her time

until her jealousy spurred her on, which was several days later.

Lila Freeman found much to like and admire in the tall, dark man she had rescued from drygulchers. Even old Abe Freeman liked him, at first, for his reputation as Dan Brown, of the Border, was well known. But when he, like Pete Welch and the others, counseled waiting, instead of action, old Abe liked him less. Not so Lila. Once, when they rode together, he asked her mildly why she hated the Baines family so fiercely. She told him of Dorsey Stevens. Somehow, in the telling, Stevens didn't seem so big and fine and righteous.

Dan's voice said mildly, "I don't aim to speak bad of the dead, Miss Lila, but if I was hiding behind a curtain ready to shoot an unsuspecting man in the back, I wouldn't squawk if that unsuspecting man saw me first and let me have it."

She stilled the angry words on her tongue. She'd never thought of Dorsey in that light. A little later they sat together beneath a flowering *retama*, and she told him of her early life, he told her of his wanderings. Silence fell. From the corner of his eye he saw her serious, intent face close to his, saw her lithe body stretched on the grass within arms' length. He turned on his elbow and was surprised to hear his own voice saying, "Lila I haven't any right to ask you, but when all this war is settled, I'd like to—!"

That was as far as he got. Her lips were very near.

NO DOUBT, Muriel Freeman, being a woman and a Latin, read aright the tender light in the eyes of her stepdaughter when she returned from that ride with Dan Brown. She decided on action.

It was not until evening that Dan Baines discovered his warbag had been tampered with. He cursed himself for a fool for not destroying his papers. And he looked well at the walnut-butted six-shooter before he attended the meeting old Abe Freeman had called for that night. He eyed every man, and every man met his eye with a grin, not an accusing grin, but a grin of comradeship.

There in the *patio* of the ranchhouse the men squatted on their heels, their cigarettes making red eyes of light in the darkness. Abe Freeman glared about the circle, gnawed at his mustache. His voice was so passion-filled he could hardly speak.

"Men," he choked, "you know why I hired you all. You know as well as I know that it hasn't done any good. Even while you fellows ride my ranges, the Baines boys strip my ranch right under your noses. I'm not accusing any of you of anything. But I'm sick of listening to words of counsel advising me to wait—wait—wait! Wait for what? To be robbed blind! No man rides my pastures tomorrow. Get your gear in shape. Tomorrow evening we ride in force to the Open Triangle. When we get through, that ranch will be no more."

Dan's heart sank as he heard those words. The listeners shifted, all seemed to look instinctively at Pete Welch. Freeman went on. "I'm telling you now, so any of you that wants to back out can pack and ride, tonight. The Baines wanted war. Tomorrow evening they get it—till the last Baines is dead!"

He turned and stumped into the house. Slowly, in little groups the men drifted away. From her vantage point, Lila Freeman started across the *patio* to intercept the man she loved. She hesitated. Muriel was at his side. She was saying something to him in a low voice. Lila saw Dan hesitate, look toward the house uncertainly, then walk away into the darkness at the side of Muriel Freeman.

For a moment Lila waited. Then, almost unwillingly, she followed. She found them in the shadows, listened.

Muriel's voice was between a taunt and a caress. "Now, proud one, things have changed, no? Now you do as Muriel want you to do!"

His answer sounded hoarse. "And that's what?"

Muriel laughed. "What a fool you are! Are you a man, or a peeg? Am I so bad to look upon?

The moon chose that moment to come from a cloud, bathing the scene in silver. Lila saw a pair of tawny arms go about the man she loved, saw fingers pulling his head, his lips, down to the lips of Muriel. She bowed her head to the hot tears of rage, and thus did not see Dan break loose, thrust the Mexican woman aside. She did hear her stepmother's biting laughter, did hear her make Dan promise to meet her the following morning—at the very same glade where Dan Brown had held her, Lila, in his arms!

Neither Dan Baines nor Lila Freeman slept much that night!

AT FIRST Lila thought she never wanted to see Dan again, but after that sleepless night, she realized from the conversation that Muriel had some hold on Dan. Curiosity—and resentment—drove her to a grove of cottonwoods, where she crouched concealed the next morning waiting for Dan and Muriel. Dan came first, his face lined and grey with worry. Soon Muriel arrived. Silently, soundlessly, Lila watched and listened.

Muriel's words were low, so low she could not distinguish them. But Dan's stern defiant reply carried to her place of concealment. "All right," he grated, "I'm Dan Baines, alias Brown. You've found it out. What do you want me to do?"

In answer, her arms slid about his neck. He thrust her away, and Lila, watching, thunderstruck because he was a Baines, felt a thrill of gratification, somehow. Muriel shrugged. Her voice was low, silky. "Thees esstupid war, *señor!* So seelly. But have you stop to theenk, eef my hosband were to die—I, his wife would own the Rocking F? We make a deal, you and I. You are the spy een position to do eet. You keel Abe Freeman! I will lure him here, or wherever you say, alone! You keel him and the war ees over. Een return, when I inherit, I geef you anytheeng you weesh!"

He looked at her levelly, trying to hide the loathing he felt. And he said, "It's a bargain! You get Abe Freeman to Wahoo Junction by midafternoon, *alone*. Will you do it?"

Eagerly Muriel nodded. She smiled and mounting her horse, rode away, leaving him looking thoughtfully after her.

"Put 'em up, you traitor!"

Lila, eyes flaming, came out of the bushes. Slowly Dan put his hands in the air. What had she heard? What would she think? "Listen," he began.

"Don't talk," she answered, "don't make it worse than it is. You liar, you cheat, you *spy!*" The gun spoke viciously. Dan Baines sprawled on his face. The woman whitened, the gun fell from her nerveless fingers. "Dan! Dan!" she called, and ran toward him. A great brown hand reached up and caught her wrist. He was shamming!

The battle was brief, though vicious. Presently he held her motionless, his face bleeding from her nails, blood trickling from his mouth. "You hell cat," he grated, "now what am I going to do with you? Leave me alone, you little fool, and this thing will be settled by evening, before your father and his riders can wipe out my brothers. Leave me alone, do you hear, let me do what I intend doing!"

She spat at him. "You spy!" A world of scorn was in her voice. "When you let me loose, I'm going to kill you. Plotting with Muriel to kill dad!"

EXACTLY forty minutes later they were together in a deserted line rider's shanty a few miles from Wahoo Junction. She glared at him. "If you think this shack will hold me ten minutes after you're gone, you killer, you're mistaken!"

He didn't smile.

In a matter of minutes he had her tied, wrists and ankles, confident that she would not be able to free herself. "Sit tight, Lila, the way you are, and

I'll ride back long about sundown."

A stream of heartfelt curses was his answer. He spurred his horse, tugged at the bridle of hers, and rode off—toward the Open Triangle.

WAHOO JUNCTION was a three-sided shack and a twenty by twenty platform, some eighteen miles from Ligero on Baines' property. Often, because of its decrepit loading pens a hundred yards away, the Baines Brothers loaded their cattle for the market at this point. It was within four miles of Dos Aguas, the twin watering holes now kept apart by the spite fence.

At three that afternoon, three men were in the three-sided shack waiting. Shad and Moses Baines, disarmed by their brother, sat sullenly and silently in a corner. They did not curse him aloud. Their eyes did that. Fifteen minutes later Abe Freeman rode over the slope slowly, warily, only to be disarmed by Dan. The enemies faced each other, glared, killed Dan a thousand times with their glances.

He began to talk. He talked a long while. They listened intently. At last, he concluded, "So, there it is. Neither of you put up the fence. It was put there by someone who wanted to make trouble. I knew it never would have been sent to Ligero direct, so I wired the hardware company to send more here to the Junction." He jerked off a tarp from the huge pile of wire on the platform. There was roll after roll of barbed wire. The tag read, "Dorsey Stevens, Wahoo Junction, Texas."

"Stevens," said Freeman hoarsely. "Stevens, then, must have drygulched your brother. But what could he gain? What could he—?"

Down by the loading pens a rifle cracked. Dan Baines spun about, fell on his face clawing at his gun. Shad sprang to his side. Freeman yelled, "It must be my boys! Probably my wife told them where I was going. Boys, boys, quit firing, I'm all right!"

He was answered by a veritable hail of fire. A bullet struck his shoulder, turned him about. Shad yelled, "Into the shelter! Get our guns, Mose, quick!" He carried the bleeding and motionless Dan into the three-sided shelter. Bullets beat against it, swarmed through the boards like angry bees. Four men who once had been enemies crouched on the floor, grimly, silently, guns in their hands. A back window and a side window allowed them to see out two sides. Shad kicked a board off on the third. Something teetered into the shanty. Mose, risking his life, was rolling in the spools of barbed wire. He grinned wryly.

"Looks like it wasn't Dorsey Stevens alone. To hell with them, whoever they are! Barbed wire started this trouble, now we'll use it for a barricade and maybe end this trouble." And the wire, stacked about, was effective. Bullets ricocheted from its impenetrable surface. But Dan Baines did not hear them. He lay white faced and silent, blood pouring from the furrow near his temple.

IT WAS almost sundown, the shadows lengthened, when he regained consciousness. Still motionless he lay there, adding the thing up. When twilight passed away he began drawing his weary frame toward the loading pens, waiting for discovery. But discovery did not come. The pens no longer sheltered their assailants. They were spread out fan wise on three sides of the shelter. Suddenly he froze, hearing a cry. The voice was easily recognized as that of Manuel Flores, right hand killer for Solo Kilgore.

"Hola inside! We give you five minutes to come out. We have your daughter, Freeman, and we kill her if you do not come out with your hands in the air!"

Lila! They had Lila! Somehow she'd gotten loose, walked, not toward home, but toward the place she thought her father was going to his death. He crouched low, gun in hand and circled the loading pit. There was no sound of firing now. Every man waited. Those

in the shelter debated what to do. Those outside waited, like beasts of prey. But, one at a time, the number of beasts was lessened. For fear for the woman he loved gave Dan Baines the soft feet of a jungle cat. His gun butt rose and fell. He crawled on—and on. Only with Flores, crouched alone behind a rock, did he have trouble! He shot the Mexican between the eyes, and in the tension the shot went uninvestigated.

He rounded a clump of *mesquite* and paused, frozen. There in the faint light he saw Lila.

Now her captor leaned over her, his voice venomous. "Now," he sneered, "you have the life of your father in your hands. Don't cringe from me, damn you! I own this town! You've sneered at me and drawn your skirts aside often enough! I've got brains, I've got money. I engineered this thing, me and Dorsey Stevens and a few others. The Baines boys will die when they walk out of there. I can kill your father, too! Folks will think they shot it out, here at the Junction. But you only got to say the word and he comes through alive."

Dan scarcely heard the groan of surrender. "Don't kill him!" A dark shape leaned over a woman, pressed noxious lips against hers.

Then a pair of hands, cruel and merciless, dragged the dark shape from the girl. The fight was brief and to the death, for Dan Baines was a raging killer. Lila pulled him off the motionless mass that once had been Solo Kilgore, boss of Ligero.

TEN MINUTES later they faced the losers of the fight, the men Dan had knocked out or disarmed, one by one on his circling stalk from the pens. Dan's arm was about Lila Freeman. Shad and Mose Baines and their new friend Abe Freeman stood behind them. Dan said, "Men sometimes take the wrong side for money. Who are we to condemn? We could take you into Ligero and let the mob hang you. But we ain't going to do it. Over there south, about forty miles, is Mexico. Get going."

Five men turned and stalked away toward the south, wordless. Twenty feet away one turned and spoke. Pete Welch said, "Well, I'm hoping there ain't no hard feelings, Dan Brown, I mean Baines. Somebody's got to be wrong. If it'll ease your mind any, Dorsey Stevens *did* drygulch your brother Sam. And you, Mister Freeman, reckon you ought to know about that wife of yours. It was her rode in and told Solo that Dan was out here at the Junction to meet you. So long and good-bye."

Abe Freeman said dryly, "Reckon the reason she did it was because I ran her off. Reckon she's headed back toward Mexico by now."

The five trudged away.

Both mounted, Dan and Lila turned their heads as they neared the Dos Aquas. He kissed her, before calling, "Hey, where you fellows going? Thought we was going over to Abe's for a little celebration."

Shad, fifty yards back, called: "You all go ahead, Dan. We got a little business. We got to take down about a hundred yards of wire. You won't be needing us, anyway."

Dan kissed Lila again as they trotted off together into the darkness.

If you enjoy SPEED WESTERN STORIES, you will like SIX-GUN WESTERN, FIGHTING WESTERN, BLAZING WESTERN, and GUNSMOKE WESTERN

By STAN WARNER

HOME AND DEAD

"TRIG" Raymond would have said yesterday that he couldn't be prodded into roping and tying a calf just to show off. But now he had a sudden notion that a little rope slinging might cool him down. Damn this fancy riding job! Double damn dude ladies sculptured by nature to start a poor hombre's blood boiling!

Yesterday the lady dude had bet he couldn't tie and rope a calf. Well, now was the time to do it.

This was Trig's first dude lady. And he was wishing to all hell he was back in patched levis riding the Double-Diamond cow spread. He didn't like any part of playing story book cowboy on old Dave Grant's dude ranch. He had been opinin' for some time that a dude lady from the refined East and a range

How Trig could have thrown his rope for the breachy calf and come up with this creature he'd never know.

Illustrated by
Newton H. Alfred

ON THE RANGE

gal of the untamed West were sisters under the skin when it came to putting their brand on a man.

Rona Morton had started his fever a few minutes before. They were in a sloping meadow pasture under the rimrock on the Crescent dude ranch. A deep, quiet creek bordered the lower edge. From the moment they had set out together, Trig had been dead sure the dude lady was spreading her loop for him.

The dude lady was a strong-minded woman. When she went after something, she got it! How could an unsophisticated Western girl hope to compete with her?

He was betting she would be a sadly disappointed dude lady if he turned out to be a dependable waddy with a conscience. Her dark eyes had been half closed and regarded him sleepily. Her red lips were puckered, provokingly, in a little smile.

The smile was sleepy and taunting, and her husky voice was the same.

"It's so hot, I wish I were Lady Godiva, Trig," she said.

"Lady Go—*who?*" said Trig. Then he added, "Sho', I recollect. The gal went ridin' an' herded off an army with nothing but her hair for duds."

"You do know," drawled the lady dude. "And your neck is getting awfully red."

Dammit! He could feel his neck turning red. The lady dude's foot left the stirrup of her standing pony and she stretched her leg with, "I feel all cramped staying in the saddle so long."

Right there was when he came back to the notion of roping a calf. A spring crop was grazing nearby in the meadow, close to the cows.

The lady dude leaned toward him. Trig swallowed hard, resolutely turned his head and stretched his lanky length in the saddle. He forced a whimsical grin. It was plain enough the lady dude was meaning she would admire to dismount and possibly walk about to more satisfactorily stretch her cramped and beautiful legs.

Trig made his decision. If he did have to hit the ground, it would be a heap safer to do it all tangled up with a roped and kicking calf than with a lady dude.

Trig put out one strong hand and she tilted her small, sleek head and raised her red mouth expectantly. Trig held a tight rein on his bay gelding, and his hand gripped the coiled lariat at the saddle horn.

"Yuh was sayin' yesterday that yuh bet there wasn't a real waddy in the Crescent dude outfit," he said quickly. "Yuh said yuh'd bet there wasn't one o' us would muss up our fancy duds ropin' and tyin' a calf like you saw 'em do at the rodeo, if any of us could do it at all. Reckon here's a chance t' make yuh repudiate them remarks."

His big silver, Mexican spurs roweled the gelding. The big bay shot forward as if released from a chute. He was a good roping horse, that one.

"But, Trig—Trig!" called out the lady dude. "Not now—I didn't mean—"

The bay was headed for a small bunch of cows and Trig picked out the calf to cut from the herd. His own unexpected action had brought a broad grin to his clean-cut face, almost as unexpected to him as to the lady dude. His grin would have been even broader, if he had heard her next words.

"You damn', dull-witted fool!" she gritted, and she sprang to the ground, one small boot stamping.

Undoubtedly the lady dude felt she must be slipping when a lonesome cowboy could play so dumb. It was a safe bet this was the first time on record any hombre had ever resisted her sleepy little smile.

TRIG RAYMOND seldom ever missed a throw with the loop of his rope. Perhaps this braided hair lariat was too stiff. Possibly his ornate rigging, all his fancy duds, which he wholeheartedly hated, hampered his swing. Or it may have been that his eye stayed too long on the slim and delectable figure of the lady dude he had so openly spurned.

The loop missed and the calf bawled, breaking down the slope toward the creek. A mother cow went breachy and broke from the bunch, coming at Trig's gelding with her short horns. Trig swore at himself in disgust, sent his cayuse after the calf and coiled in the rope.

The bawling calf was headed straight for the creek and the fringe of bushes along the flat shore. Trig cussed some more at the pair of six-guns banging his thighs, these being a part of the dude ranch idea of a he-man puncher, along with the other costly rigging. The guns were in his way.

Her screams became moans until consciousness mercifully left her.

But he had the humor to grin again, as he judged that he wasn't making much of a hit as a show-off calf roper. As he widened the loop, swung it and

judged the distance, the calf vanished behind the fringe of bushes on the creek shore.

Trig decided it would be extra fancy to snap the loop over the barrier and take a chance on laying it over the calf this time. It seemed to him the calf had stopped suddenly. The breachy cow came plunging down behind him as he let go the loop.

The loop hissed over the bushes, dropped, and Trig felt it make contact. He dallied it around the saddle horn, reined up the bay. He was figuring he wouldn't go through with tying the calf, after all. The bit of fast play had rounded up his dangerous ideas about the lady dude, and he had them safely corraled.

Then the calf screamed.

Trig's heart almost stopped, then his pulses pounded madly. The rope was tightened by the dally, and it jerked. He instinctively trapped it as the gelding remained with his forefeet planted, wondering why his rider didn't roll off and finish the job.

It seemed that the calf screamed again, but Trig shook his head to clear his eyes. If that was the calf screaming, then it was the damnedest cow critter he had ever met up with. For the scream was that of a human female critter.

The calf came dashing back from among the bushes. The gelding broke, as the breachy cow jammed his haunches with her thick head. Before Trig could pull up the horse, the tight lass rope jerked its screaming victim through the bushes and into the open.

BEFORE he could close his dropped jaw, speak, dismount or loosen the dally, he heard the lady dude's sarcastic voice.

"When it comes to ropin' a calf, cowboy, you've got them all beaten! I'll bet you're the first puncher living that ever threw a loop at a calf and came up with a blonde!" She was back on her pony riding after him.

"Holy cow!" grated Trig, loosening the dally and hitting the ground. "Sandra Layton? Wait! I'll help yuh!"

He was running toward her, and he should have been discreetly looking the other way. If ever a vision was created to delight the eyes of man, it was the perfect figure trapped in the tightened loop that had dropped over her shoulders.

"So you recognize the gal, cowboy?" drawled the lady dude, as she followed Trig closely.

"Perhaps you'd know her, even if you didn't see her face?"

Trig didn't reply to her, but he muttered, "Yuh damn' hairpin!"

For the gal he had called Sandra Layton was as lovely a blonde as one could be when she is waving a wet, little gingham dress in one hand and trying to prevent a lass rope from crushing her at the same time. It seemed she must have been washing the dress in the creek, believing herself secure in the isolated meadow from all prying eyes.

She was small, but as perfectly formed as a doll. Her hair was golden yellow and long, streaming almost to her waist, over her slip.

The lassoed girl managed to get her breath after her screaming. Because of her confusion, Trig was almost upon her before she identified him.

"Trig Raymond!" she gasped. "Oh, what made you do it, Trig? Please! Please, get this off! Don't be shamin' me this way!"

The hair rope should have played freely in the loop, but it had twisted. Trig's hand trembled as he loosened the twist in the loop.

The lady dude's ironical voice stung him again.

"Pretty soon, cowboy, you'll have to go rope another calf," she drawled maliciously.

"Oh, Trig," murmured the other girl. "I didn't know there'd be anybody ridin' this way."

"It's all right, Sandra, forget it," he said.

Then, abruptly, he chilled.

From up the creek, perhaps fifty

It was obvious that he was as willing to shoot his sister as the dude ranch rider!

yards away, a six-gun whammed. The slug whistled viciously through the bushes. A tall man with a young, but frightfully scarred face loomed up.

"Git yore hands off'n her, hombre, 'fore I make the next un dead center!" he commanded harshly. "Le'go my sister, yuh lowdown skunk!"

"Your brother Scar!" grated Trig, dropping his hands, and at the same time touching ivory gun butts, as he stepped back.

"Up weeth 'em, greengo!" rapped out another voice. A second figure reared up and a rifle was aimed at Trig's middle. "Keep 'em up, or I'll dreel you!"

Trig knew when the cards were stacked against him. His hands were being slowly lifted, when his eye cornered upon the lady dude. In spite of

the risk of being salivated, he sprang sideways, and whirled in a long jump toward the lady dude's pony.

For she was bringing up a shiny, small-calibred gun, that at the distance from the men in the bushes would have been about as effective as a pea-shooter.

"Drop it, you fool!" shouted Trig. "You'll get us all—"

The little gun flamed, just as he struck it to one side. And he but faintly heard Sandra Layton cry out behind him. For either the slug from the lady dude's revolver or one from a gun behind him seemed to smash him between the ears.

It hadn't drilled his skull, as he believed, or he wouldn't have been thinking about it at all. But it did furrow his scalp and scour the bone, and produce a concussion that turned his knees to water. He was conscious for perhaps ten seconds after he slumped to the ground.

Before he gave it up and passed out, his thoughts were in a turmoil.

What was Sandra Layton doing here? And Scar Layton? For Scar Layton had been run off the Double Diamond a year before when he had been suspected of being in cahoots with "Mex" Mendoza, half breed mestizo and outlaw killer. And Sandra had been hashing in the restaurant at Oxbow for all of that year.

That had been Mex Mendoza himself with the lifted rifle. And they were here, not so far from the Crescent dude ranch house.

Trig got only as far as the questions and failed to think of any possible answers. He tried to open his eyes and see what might have happened to Rona Morton, the lady dude, but the ground was going out from under him and he was falling into a deep black pit.

"I'LL never go with him! Never! Never! I'll kill myself first!"

The words were screamed and they penetrated to Trig Raymond's fogged and pounding brain. The fog cleared a little, and it cleared more as the vicious hissing of a riding quirt and then its slashing contact brought an agonized scream that had no words. Then it was that Trig discovered his arms were bound with a lass rope behind him and that the rope had been wound around his legs.

Again the hissing whip, and again the scream. He could curse and he did. He could turn his head, and he wished he had been unable to see. For he was on the floor of a cabin built of split shakes, and he could see through a narrow doorway into a lamp-lighted room.

"No! I'll die first—I'll—"

"Yuh'll be ready tuh ride with Toro, or I'll whip the hide off'n yore body!"

Doll-like Sandra Layton was kneeling on the floor of the other room. Trig could see her wide, blue eyes, as her pretty face was uplifted in helpless and futile appeal to the scarred and brutal visage of her brother.

The beady eyes of the dark-faced Toro Mendoza were glittering as Sandra threw herself on her face, groveling desperately. The quirt hissed, and the screams became moans, as the girl's consciousness mercifully dulled.

Trig choked back the mad oaths that he wanted to shout. His teeth were clenched and gritting, as he had the quick wit to think that possibly his only chance would be to feign unconsciousness.

"Eet ees enough," said Toro Mendoza, licking his lips. "She weel be the woman for Toro when she ees tamed. She knows too much, so I weel see she ees no come back to talk."

The face of the brutal, scarred brother was working as he shoved Sandra with a rough foot and she lay limply, without movement.

"It's time we're palaverin' with that other'n," he said to Toro. "Havin' that damn' dude rider throwed into our hands has gi' me an idee. If he dies 'fore we finish this chore, it'll make it all the better."

Trig closed his eyes. When they came in and held the lamp close, he tried not to breathe. He repressed a groan when

a boot toe ground into his ribs.

"He ees keep fine," gloated Toro Mendoza.

"C'mon," said Scar Layton. "We'll git us some chuck. Hain't no sense in ridin' down on the Crescent spread 'fore midnight. Old Grant is a heller with a hog-laig."

MENDOZA and Scar Layton clumped out. Trig Raymond called out softly to Sandra, but she was lying quite still, like some pitiful, stricken thing on the floor, the yellow lamplight playing over her. Trig tried to piece together what he had heard to guess what might be in the wind. Old Dave Grant, his Chinese cook and an Englishman named J. Grayson Faversham were the only persons he knew to be at the Crescent ranch house.

Eight of the dude guest cabins were occupied by easterners, but all of the guests except Rona Morton and Faversham had left in a party for an overnight fishing and camping trip in the mountains. Trig swore at himself, as he recalled how Rona Morton had deliberately cut him out from among the other riders and appropriated him for herself.

The ride in the evening dusk had been her suggestion. Trig had hoped that Faversham, the Britisher, would accompany them. But when they were saddled, Faversham was snoring in a hammock with a drink of fancy bug juice close at hand.

Trig thought quickly of the dude guests' jewelry and money in their cabins. The dudes from the East seemed to have an idea that here in the wild and woolly West the only thieves were those who went around sticking up stage coaches and rustling cattle.

Then Trig thought of something else that started him fighting the rope around his arms. Old Dave Grant was a stubborn coot. He had been having a personal feud with the banker at Oxbow, and he kept all of his cash in a strong box in the ranch house. He had heard the old man boast he had saved nearly $20,000 as the final payment on the Crescent spread mortgage.

The presence of Toro Mendoza, accompanied by Scar Layton, was enough in itself to put an honest man on his guard. But now they must have the dude lady, Rona, a prisoner in another cabin.

"Damn 'em!" gritted Trig. "Maybe they know she's supposed to have a hell slew o' dinero, an' they're figgerin' on holdin' her for ransom!"

He was almost winded with his effort, and the rope seemed to be getting tighter around his arms. His strength was lessened by numbness in all of his muscles. Then he thought, if he could but revive the beaten girl lying in the other room? Perhaps she could free him before the others returned?

And as he thought of that, he determined, that if he lived, he would run down Mendoza and Scar Layton, and pleasure himself by pulling them to pieces with his bare hands. And it was then it came to Trig Raymond that he would prefer a girl like Sandra Layton to any lady dude with all of her money and her downright hussy ways.

Trig found he could roll himself slowly toward the open doorway. He had made the second roll when he heard a slight scuffling. When his eyes came around, he saw Sandra crawling, making her way slowly toward him. Then she must have seen that he was alive and conscious, and it must have brought more strength to her bruised body. And there seemed no thought of anything then but reaching him, for she came to her feet. He could not see her eyes, because the light was behind her. She knelt quickly beside him, murmuring.

"Trig! Oh, Trig! What will we do?"

"Get the knife from my pocket, Sandra," he directed. "And make it pronto, 'fore them sidewinders take a notion to come back."

The knife was there, although his fancy six-guns had been taken. The blade slashed the ropes around his arms and pain like a million needles stung

his veins. When the ropes came off his legs, he discovered he had not the strength to stand, and he flexed his muscles desperately.

"Oh, Trig, can I help you?" cried out Sandra fearfully. "Maybe you're bad hit! There's some whisky—I'll get it!"

HE WAS listening intently, still attempting to find his feet. She came with a half empty bottle and the heat of it warmed his stomach and coursed to his brain. He was sitting up then and Sandra was beside him.

Neither of them could have told how it happened. Perhaps it was the deep sob that Sandra tried to hold back that caused Trig to get his slow-moving arms around her. Then her lips were pressing to his in the impulse of reaction that must have been flooding from her heart.

Although the need for haste was urgent, and death itself might be coming upon them because of that lingering kiss, Trig's brain forgot its ache in the dizzying storm that hit it.

"A whole year—I've watched you, Trig, honey, hoping you'd notice me—"

Well, she was Sandra and not the dude lady. It was sure loco, but damned if he wasn't even forgetting for the few precious minutes the threat that hovered over them.

THE cursing voices of Toro Mendoza and Scar Layton curbed Trig's madness abruptly, and he staggered to his feet on legs that still were weak and wobbly.

"The light, Sandra! Smash it out!"

She could move faster than Trip could manage, and she ran lightly into the other room, overturning the table and the lamp as she hit them. Then she was groping her way back in the darkness when Scar Layton's hard voice sounded in the doorway.

"Drop right whar yuh are, or I'll start shootin' promiscuous! If yuh don't, I ain't carin' if'n I git both o'yuh!"

Confirming his threat and the willingness to drill his sister as quickly as he would the dude ranch rider, Scar Layton triggered an iron and bullets tore splinters from the slab shakes of the wall. Trig heard Sandra cry out, and he was afraid she had been hit.

"Get outside, Sandra!" directed Trig as he flattened to the floor.

He heard her feet patter lightly and believed she was gone. He attempted to lift himself, and the metal of a gun with a slicing sight crashed the middle of his forehead. His senses went out in a blinding flash of light.

A BLAZING afternoon sun beat upon Trig Raymond's aching and unprotected head when he forced his eye-lids to open against gluing dried blood. He first became conscious that he was sitting on a horse. Something itched his neck, but when he tried to lift a hand to allay the irritation, he had rope around his wrists and they were behind his back.

"And when I tried to fight them, Trig Raymond proved he was with them by knocking my revolver from my hand and pulling me from the saddle," spoke a hard, cold voice. "He knocked me down, and the girl with them helped him hold me. After that, they took me to a cabin and—oh, do I have to repeat all of it again?"

"No, Miss Morton, yuh don't need tuh horror yoreself recollectin' whut happened," said a stern voice, and Trig knew that was old Hank Jeffers, the dude ranch ramrod. "Whilst they wuz up hyar with Trig Raymond, plunderin' an' murderin', yuh got away."

"It was awful," said the dude lady. "I'll never forget how they beat me until I couldn't fight any more. You can see the bruises."

Trig had his eyes open, but slitted down. The dude lady was standing close to Hank Jeffers. Trig's breath caught. She was clad in the thin gingham dress that Sandra Layton had been washing in the creek. It was badly torn. The dude lady's smooth arms were marked with blue bruises and her red lips were swollen.

Trig was dizzy and sick, but he hadn't pulled her from the saddle. He had not held her, and Sandra had not helped him. What in the hell and all was this? How had he come here?

Old Hank said, "An' yuh say, Mr. Faversham, yuh saw Trig Raymond gun down Dave Grant an' one o' the other owlhoots drilled the chink cook arter they cotched yuh up an' hogtied yuh tuh the porch post?"

"I saw this cow rider you call Raymond and Mr. Grant exchanging shots, old chap," said J. Grayson Faversham, and Trig saw the Englishman's solemn red face. "Mr. Grant detected Raymond emerging from Miss Morton's cabin before the shooting started. Then two other rough appearing chaps seized me brutally and tied me to the post. The Chinese cook was fighting with Raymond the last I remember."

The Englishman's voice was calm, but his hand was holding a glass of fancy bug juice and it was shaking.

Trig's eyes swung. A dozen of his fellow waddies in their dude riding rig were standing around him. Trig's neck still itched. He became aware that the rough hemp of a looped rope caused it. The bare limb of a cottonwood tree stuck out only a few feet above his head. The rope was around his neck.

One of the waddies spoke up. "An' when we high-tailed into the rimrock medder, Hank, them owlhoots had maybe had a ruckus over splittin' up the loot they took from the cabins. We found them few pieces spilled in the ol' cabin, but most of the stuff was gone. Reckon as how this Scar Layton done the first gunnin', 'cause Toro Mendoza was laid out with a pair o' bullets in his brisket, while Layton had been drilled from behind an' his backbone nigh split apart. Both of 'em dead."

Trig was keeping his eyes partly closed. He could feel hands supporting him in the saddle on both sides. The horse was his own bay gelding. He saw old Hank holding and slowly turning over a pair of guns. They were his own ornate irons with the silver inlay on the stocks.

And the last Trig had remembered was his telling Sandra to get out of the cabin and run for it, then he had been smashed over the head. No doubt the hard-eyed Hank Jeffers and his waddies believed all of Trig's wounds had been inflicted in the fight with old Dave Grant and the Chink cook. His guns must have been on him or close by when they had found him.

But Rona Morton and Faversham were lying. Why? Trig tried to recall if he had ever seen Rona and Faversham together. He could not remember.

"Yup," said old Hank Jeffers. "Thet's the how o' it then. They gunned each other fightin' over the loot, an' thet damn' gal Miss Morton's told us about is gone. Reckon she was waitin' and saw the killin' ruckus. Then she took the

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stuff stolen frum the cabins an' one o' thar hosses an' high-tailed fer the badlands herself."

SANDRA gone? What had happened to her? Trig didn't believe old Hank was correct in his justified theory, any more than he could understand what in all hell the real play had been. He realized he was in a tight loop and nothing he could say would do much good.

Old Dave Grant murdered?

Why, dammit, the slick dude lady had been the one who had insisted he ride with her over to the rimrock meadow. Damned if she hadn't been running a ranny on him. Wanted to get him off his horse and on the ground.

But he had gone hellin' after a calf, an' roped a gal in the bushes. That had put him on the ground, anyway, and the frame-up had worked perfectly. Doggone, if he hadn't seen the whipping Sandra had been given, and if he hadn't held her in his arms, he would have had to believe she was in on the gulchin' trap.

Trig grew a little sicker than he had been. In spite of the whipping, it might be so that Sandra had been a part of the ambush trap. The whipping had come afterward, when the golden-haired girl had refused her brother's command that she become Toro Mendoza's woman.

"Yuh folks git back in yore cabins fer a spell!" suddenly ordered old Hank Jeffers. "This here's somethin' of the real west yuh ain't payin' tuh see!"

Trig's gaze slanted past the ring of men around his horse under the cottonwood they were about to make his gallows tree. He hated all Easterners in this minute, seeing them lined up like a bunch of their kind of yaps at a rodeo achin' to see some rider bucked off and tromped. That was their kind.

They would be boasting to their friends all their lives how they'd seen a thievin' murderer lynched, strung up with a hemp rope in front of their cabins. Some of the dude ladies were there, too, their provocative tongues licking at painted lips. And little Sandra?

God? She must be somewhere now in the badlands, possibly lost, fleeing in terror! Out there somewhere she would soon die of hunger and thirst!

Old Hank said, "Yuh wouldn't hanker tuh be seein', Miss Morton, so yuh git yoreself tuh the ranch house an' rest a spell. We'll be ridin' arter thet danged wildcat gal an' bringin' her back. Reckon she's got Dave Grant's money out'n his strong box along with the other loot, an' she won't be ridin' far."

IT WAS the first time Dave Grant's $20,000 had been mentioned. Trig straightened, pulling loose from the hands he had permitted to support him. He spoke for the first time. Though much had been said, it had been less than three minutes since he had come to himself. It was funny, for he was here with hemp around his neck, but it was Sandra he spoke up for.

"Yuh're throwin' yore loop plumb wild, Hank!"

His voice brought startled faces around. Hate and violence was in the eyes of all his fellow waddies. Hank said, "So yuh've found yore pizen tongue?

"Reckon, Hank, there's other pizen tongues!" grated Trig harshly. "Sandra Layton was gone 'fore her skunk brother an' Toro rode tuh the Crescent ranch house. Yuh gotta send a posse after her, Hank. She's maybe lost in the malpais back of the rimrock, an' she'll die out there."

Old Hank's blue eyes were gleaming in their sockets as he stepped in front of Trig.

"So thet's how she be, Raymond!" he snapped. "Yuh went sweet on a damn' owlhoot gal an' let 'er palaver yuh inter lootin' an' killin'! Speakin' up fer the shameless critter when yuh're own neck's overdue tuh be stretched—"

"Gimme my hands unloosed for just ten seconds, just ten seconds, Hank!" grated Trig. "An' I'll knock yore filthy words down yore neck along with yore yeller teeth! I'll—"

"Reckon we've listened to enough!"

barked one of the waddies with an added oath. "Let's get it over with!"

Rona Morton, the dude lady, was turning away. Two waddies were compelling the Easterners to go back into their cabins. The rope around Trig's neck suddenly tightened and a waddy was letting go of his bay gelding's bridle rein.

Trig was working desperately at the lass rope tied loosely about his wrists, possibly because he had not been expected to recover his senses.

"Anyway, whatever yuh're believin', Hank Jeffers!" he choked out. "Sandra Layton's innocent! She's lost, I tell yuh! For God's sake have hoss sense enough to start huntin' for her!"

ALMOST on his words, the sharp, fast clickety-click of a pony's running feet sounded. The cayuse was coming down the trail and it appeared as if the animal was running away. It stayed the waddies for a second, but the gelding broke in fright from under Trig.

The hanging rope tightened and his body swung, turned around with sickening slowness as the hemp snapped taut.

"Who's been missin?" yelled old Hank. "Shore thought alla the dudes had rid back with us!"

The small figure on the back of the running pony was clad in a silk shirt, and tight riding breeches and trim boots. She looked like a dude girl, except that yellow hair was flying back in the wind. As Trig's hanged body turned gruesomely, suspended from the low cottonwood limb, and his gelding broke away and free of the circle, every eye was upon the speeding pony.

A girl's shrill cry rang out.

"Yuh fools! Oh, you dumb fools! Cut 'im down! Trig! Trig!"

"Sandra Layton!" roared one of the waddies. "What in all hell now?"

The pony was reined up, forefeet skidding. Sandra's light figure came all the way over the cayuse's head, but she turned, landing on her feet, and she was screaming at them.

"Damn alla yuh! Get Trig down! Get him down! He didn't kill Dave Grant! He didn't—"

A waddy reached for her and her knuckles slapped across his mouth. No one noticed Rona Morton, the dude lady, snatching a small revolver from under the thin gingham dress. The small calibre gun whipped up and exploded with a spiteful crack.

Sandra was spun around, but she stayed on her feet, and as she faced the dude lady a wet, red spot appeared on the silk shirt to one side of her throat and under it, where the lead nicked her shoulder.

"You she devil! Devil dude lady!"

Sandra screamed the words, and her yellow hair whipped out as she lunged from her toes straight at Rona Morton The revolver exploded again, but the bullet spurted dust. For Sandra's shoulder struck Rona's knees, and her small fists pounded into the dude lady's stomach with drumming impact.

"Take her off of me! Grab her!"

Rona's frantic appeal came too late. Sandra kept screaming, "You killed Trig! You she devil."

OLD Hank got to Sandra then, reaching to seize her. But he was too late. Sandra had knocked the revolver up hard, and it smashed across the dude lady's red mouth, breaking her white teeth. But there was something else exposed suddenly in that struggle. It was a soft, black leather belt around the dude lady's waist, and it was filled with pockets.

Sandra's strong fingers tore its buckle loose. Sandra swung the belt, and pockets burst open. Gleaming jewels cascaded to the ground.

"There you are, you fools!" cried out Sandra, and her eyes had turned with suffering to Trig Raymond's swinging body. But it was funny that she did not make an instant move to reach him, to save him. All were circling her, watching her.

(Continued on page 83)

Surgeon of the Dim Trails

By WILL NICHOLS

ONE of the most daring defenses ever put up by an express messenger against road bandits in all the violent and colorful history of the Western stagecoaches led up to the grim final chapter in the curious career of Tom Bell, surgeon turned highwayman. The brief but terrific road battle took place on August 12, 1856, when Bill Dobson, guarding $100,000 in gold on one of Sam Langton's California stages, fought off Bell and six members of his bloody crew.

Tom Bell, known, as have been innumerable other such rogues since time began, as "The Gentleman Highwayman," was christened Thomas J. Hodges. Born of respectable parents in Rome, Tennessee, a hamlet on the banks of the Cumberland, he was raised decently and showed great promise of becoming a useful citizen. He was graduated from an Eastern medical college in 1846 just before the Mexican War, entered the Army as a non-commissioned officer, and served with distinction.

He left the Army in 1848 and soon was drawn by the golden magnet of California. For two or three years he tried his luck there at prospecting, with no success. He began to drink heavily, took to gambling, and then, having little luck at this either, turned to thievery. In 1885, convicted of grand larceny, he was sent to the California state prison on Angel Island. Soon afterwards he escaped in company with five others, four of whom then became the principal lieutenants of his outlaw gang.

Dr. Hodges, to confuse the authorities, took the name of another current outlaw, Tom Bell. He was then in his early thirties, tall, muscular, and of commanding presence, with light-blue eyes, a mane of sandy hair, and a yellow mustache and goatee. His distinguished appearance, however, was marred by a nose that in some fight had been flattened at the bridge and was now merely a button.

With his superior intelligence and education and reckless courage he exercised a firm control over a motley band of exceptionally bloodthirsty desperadoes. But he had a weakness for swaggering, and delighted to drop into a saloon, announce his identity, and laugh while the customers trembled at his name.

THE Bell gang had three hang-outs. These were the Mountaineer House, a tavern three miles from Auburn on the Folsom Road, which was also used as headquarters by the notorious Rattlesnake Dick and his followers; the Western Exchange, operated by a fat, red-headed woman named Elizabeth Hood, with one of whose three daughters Bell had fallen in love; and the California House, twenty-five miles from Marysville on the Comptonville Road.

It was from the last-named headquarters that the gang went forth on what they thought would be its greatest triumph, but which turned out to be its Waterloo.

On August 12, 1856, Sam Langton's Marysville and Comptonville stage rolled down the narrow highway that wound through the thick mountain pine forests and pulled up at the California House. A man in miner's clothes got off and the stage continued on.

The "miner" was in reality a Bell spy, and he immediately informed his chief that the stage was carrying a shipment of $100,000 in gold. He reported that five of the passengers, four Chinamen and the Negro wife of a Marysville barber, could be counted out in any test of arms.

At once Bell and six of his tough gunmen leapt to horse and pounded by a short-cut trail to lie in wait for the stage at Dry Creek, a few miles away.

Soon, the coach lumbered into view. Just then, a rider came galloping along a nearby crossroad. He turned out to be

one Rideout, a Comptonville gold-dust buyer. He was speedily halted and disarmed.

As the approaching stage reached a point fifty yards or so from where the mounted bandits were hiding, five of them, led by Bell, sprang out from amongst the trees and into the road, and Bell shouted a command to halt.

IF the gang hoped that this sudden appearance of armed men in the road would frighten their victims into quick submission, they were sadly surprised. The driver, John Gear, pulled up. But the Langton messenger, Bill Dobson, at once opened up with his shotguns. At the first blast, Bell's horse fell down and the outlaw leader knelt, slightly wounded, in the road. The other bandits responded with a heavy return fire. One white passenger and the four Chinamen leaped from the coach and dived into the underbrush. But two other passengers drew pistols and joined in the defense. As hot lead swept the beleaguered coach, the Negro woman slumped to the floor with a bullet through her brain, and a moment later one of the fighting passengers was put out of commission with slugs in both legs. Another bullet shattered the driver's right forearm.

But reckless Bill Dobson was now pumping away with two six-guns. Two of the bandits swayed in the saddle, badly wounded. Suddenly the confused, cursing outlaws had had enough. Bell was dragged up across a pommel and they fled down the highway.

Just as they disappeared around a bend, the sixth bandit, a Mexican, who had crept through the brush to a point abreast of the stage, opened fire on it. Bill Dobson blazed back, and the Mexican toppled from his horse.

Dobson then shouted to Gear, the driver, to get under way. When this was not instantly done, he excitedly shouted a threat to kill him—and then learned that Gear was wounded. So Dobson, who in the exchange of fifty or sixty shots had not been touched, then climbed to the box and himself drove the bloody coach toward its destination of Marysville.

Rideout, the Comptonville gold-dust buyer, had ridden on ahead and given an account of the battle. As the stage neared Marysville, it was met by a tumultuous crowd, led by a band, which greeted Dobson as a hero and escorted him in triumph to the town hall, where the mayor delivered a fulsome eulogy to the daring messenger. The next night, the town gave a banquet in his honor, at which Sam Langton presented him with a cash award and a gold watch.

The citizens were now aroused to fever pitch against the holdup gang. Dozens of law officers and deputies searched the hills. Within a few weeks, two of the Bell outlaws were captured and promptly hanged. Soon thereafter, a sheriff's posse came upon Bell and Ned Conner, one of his chief lieutenants, and in the resultant gun battle Conner was killed. Bell escaped and made his way far to the south to the upper Merced River country, where Elizabeth Hood, at his persuasion, had taken herself and her three daughters.

But the authorities, knowing of Bell's weakness for one of the daughters, had traced the women there. Succumbing to threats, Mrs. Hood revealed Bell's whereabouts to the law officers.

Early in the afternoon of October 6, 1856, Bell casually sat in his saddle on a mountain trail, talking with a Mexican trapper. Feeling, in this territory, perfectly well removed from the scenes of his recent crimes, he scarcely glanced at the approaching party of nine deer hunters. And thus when he looked up a few minutes later to find trained on him the nine rifles of the party, which was composed of the sheriff of Calaveras county and eight deputies, he could do nothing but surrender. Identified beyond doubt by his wrecked nose, he found it useless to protest that he was the wrong man.

The posse gave him four hours to write letters of farewell to his true love and to the relatives back in Tennessee whom he had disgraced. And then, as the shadows lengthened on the mountain slopes, Dr. Thomas J. Hodges was hanged from a tree.

Two Makes a Pair

(Continued from page 25)

I was figuring on the way you covered up for Brack Laird. You know damned well he shot Hat Nelson. You hid the rifle he shot him with. I guess you had an idea about Naomi, huh?"

Despite the gun he held on me, I grinned. A lot of things were clear, and I knew—positively—the Lairds had no hand in Hat's death.

"Look, Sugrue," I hooted. "You follow me. When you rode up and saw Hat's body, you weren't surprised, nor scared. Gandy and Laird were. You found the spot where *you* had stood, killed Hat with Laird's rifle, and left the rifle there for evidence. Laird and Hat had had trouble over Naomi's visits, so Laird really would have been strung up. You'd had the girl, huh? Maybe you'd have figured Laird an alibi if Naomi had come to you."

Sugrue's mean eyes narrowed. Nurpha Mimms' heavy breathing sounded very loud in the room.

"Where you slipped, Sugrue," I persisted. "Naomi had trailed after her father that morning. She heard the shot, came on, and she found the rifle and took it away, afraid her old man had shot Hat—as you'd wanted Gandy to find it and think. You knew Gandy was coming out, to see about Handers being shot. Handers had got drunk and blabbed to Hat. You shot Handers, met Gandy next morning. Before that, you rode up and shot Hat and hurried back. Met Laird, and told him your horse was tired because you'd chased a mossie in the brush. . . . Laird wouldn't have talked, anyhow.

"Where you slipped, Sugrue, is the cigar butt you chewed up, and the information Hat had written down. What he learned from Handers."

"That damned girl butting in!" Sugrue snarled. He licked his lips. I watched the signs; the pound at his temples, the way he drew in a slow, long, long breath, and tensed. I let my gun's hammer fall a fraction ahead of Sugrue's. The slug got him high in the brisket and knocked him off his feet as if a mule had kicked him. His own shot missed me and came close enough to Nurpha so that it sent her diving headfirst behind the couch.

I went to Sugrue and kicked the gun out of his hand as he made a feeble, dying effort to raise it and get to his knees. I heard Nurpha yell, "Hey, you fool!" as I thumbed my gunhammer back again, yanked open the door and leaped through. I slammed into the barroom just as three gents there were going out in a hurry.

SUGRUE'S rider slammed a shot that missed me by a comfortable margin and smashed backbar glass. I hunkered at the end of the bar and put my brand on him. He clapped his left hand to his broken right upper arm and commenced some sort of crazy dance as he cussed time to his steps.

"You—damn—buskies!" I snarled at the other two.

They hesitated, dropped their guns on the bar-room floor, raised their hands.

"You three figured to run out, then pot me when I left, huh?" I jeered. "Hell, I was weaned on that old stunt."

"A'right," one of them grunted. "Just what kinda milk you expect to get outta us? We ain't done nothin'—"

"But run in rustled dogies and sell them to Sugrue," I agreed.

I looked at them a minute. The silent one of the pair was pretty young, and, hell, he'd not hurt me. *"Vamose."* I snapped. "You'd better put salt flats between you and here before Gandy comes to clear this mess and puts you up salt creek."

They blinked. The talkative one

grinned. "I hate to say thanks to a lawside leaner," he admitted. "But *gracias.*"

I heard them ride off, turned to Sugrue's man who was leaning against the bar, face deathly white.

"I ain't hurt so bad I can't ride, too," he whined.

"Hightail," I told him, and went back into Nurpha's room.

Sugrue was very much a dead man and Nurpha was staring at him and shaking. She glared at me. I grunted, "You thought that mess out there would get me, you'd cover all this—"

"To hell with you!" she choked. "I'm getting out of here."

I left her packing a few belongings that she could take away on a horse. . . .

I CALLED Brack Laird over to me when I reached his place. I said: "Laird, you were afraid Naomi killed Hat, and she's been afriad you did. Neither of you did."

"Ahhh." He sighed his profund relief. "Another thing," I went on, "is about Sugrue. He killed Hat—"

"I can't testify against Sugrue," Laird croaked.

"Because of Yuma?" I inquired softly.

"Yes." He seemed to sag all over. "Reckon you know, then. Years ago, I escaped Yuma prison—the world's hellhole. Swum the Colorado and got away. Married, and Naomi was born. Sugrue was doing short time when I escaped. When he showed here, he recognized me, held that escape over my head. I didn't want Naomi to know but—"

"Laird," I said, "Sugrue is dead. Nobody will ever know. You see, a man isn't going to turn his future father-in-law over to the law. So you trot into town and bring Gandy out here. No questions, now!"

"You—and—Naomi?" Laird blinked.

"I hope so," I said as I went toward the house.

She was there. She had heard what I told her father. As I went in, I was met by a whirlwind of soft arms and lips. She'd been waiting for the right man.

Well, she'd found him. . . .

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Speed Western Stories, published monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1946.

County of New York } ss.
State of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Frank Armer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Speed Western Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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(Signed) Frank Armer
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1946.
(Seal)

(Signed) Wm. A. Kane, Jr.
(My commission expires March 30, 1948)

Way of a Hero

By NICK WILLIAMSON

THE annals of the Old West are filled with tales of the heroic journeys of lone men through danger-packed terrain, where the odds against survival were slim indeed even for the desperate breed of stalwarts that the times and country nurtured. A typical story of high courage is that of young Dennis Driscoll, sailor turned infantryman, a fighting man of the early Sixties who won through to a place of undying fame in the gory history of Indian wars.

Driscoll was an adventurous Irish lad who, after a few years before the mast, enlisted in the U. S. Army and soon found himself, with the rest of Company K, 27th U. S. Infantry, in the Montana (as it later became) Powder River country—a desolate region to which the 27th Infantry had been ordered by Secretary of War Stanton as punishment for one of its officers who had incurred the Secretary's wrath by persistent requests for a change of assignment.

Driscoll was a member of an expedition of about fifty soldiers who had traveled from Fort C. F. Smith to Fort Kearney. The journey there had been uneventful, but, halfway back on the return trip, the expedition was attacked by a force of Sioux outnumbering it by at least fifty to one.

As the ambushing redskins charged at the wagon train, the riding stock stampeded, leaving the soldiers only a few animals, among them an old mule, blind in one eye, belonging to Driscoll. The men immediately turned over the wagons and shot the remaining horses to make a barricade, and made ready to stand a siege as long as they could—although being short of both water and ammunition, the outcome seemed practically hopeless.

The commanding officer called for volunteers to attempt to reach aid at Fort Smith. There was no response, the prevailing opinion being that it was better to stay where there was at least the remote chance of a saving miracle rather than venture forth to certain death.

Again volunteers were called for. Again no response. But at the third call, Dennis Driscoll stepped forward. "Maybe I can make it," he said. "I've still got a mount." And in the desperate situation nobody smiled as he gestured toward the ancient, half-blind mule he hadn't been able to bring himself to slaughter.

Old-timer Sergeant Canadian Jack Henshaw handed him his guns, the best in the outfit, and slung a pair of field-glasses about the youth's scrawny neck. When night fell, Dennis Driscoll, mounted on his pathetic steed, slipped between wagons and galloped off.

INCREDIBLY, he passed through the Indian guards and reached the other side of their line. He rode all night, and at dawn pulled up on a ridge and surveyed the surrounding landscape through his glasses. The plains lay desolate and clear—except for a small herd of bison some distance to the rear. He started forward again. A little later he glanced back. The buffalo seemed to be following him. He paused again and trained his glasses on the herd. This time his heart almost stopped: the herd was gaining on him with unusual speed—the reason for that being, as he could now plainly see, that the herd was composed of Indians, lying low on ponies and each covered with a buffalo robe.

Driscoll now set spurs to his mule and urged the last bit of speed from the animal. With this, the Indians threw off all pretence and charged after him. But the mule, exhausted by the night's ride, was unequal to the task and soon had slowed to a staggering canter. As the redskins swiftly approached, Driscoll halted the mule, slid from the saddle and, with no hesitation now, shot him. Then he lay behind the body, his guns ready.

The Indians drew close, sure of their

game. The infantryman's guns blazed expertly, again and again. With each shot an Indian fell. The remainder quickly withdrew to a safe distance. After a council, they charged again. And again the white man's guns spoke with deadly authority, forcing another withdrawal.

This time the council was longer. Then the redskins spread out to surround Driscoll. In a few moments, huge flames from fired grass swept toward him.

Parts of the prairie were still damp from recent rains, and this caused heavy, billowing smoke. And when Driscoll could stand the terrific heat and strangling smoke no longer, he left the protection of the dead mule—and, lost from view in the smoke, dashed over burned ground and escaped.

A few hundred yards away, he came upon an icy creek. He plunged in and, holding his guns out of the water, waded and swam upstream until the brush and willows at the bank were thick. Here he stumbled ashore and hid until nightfall.

The night was cloudy, and Driscoll could get no directions from the hidden stars. Half-frozen, he trudged along until dawn—when up ahead he suddenly made out the tepees of an Indian camp. As he turned to flee, dogs began to bark, and he had gone only about a quarter of a mile when a dozen braves gave chase.

They were on foot, but the weary soldier knew he had no chance to outrun them, fresh from slumber. He reached a natural breastworks of boulders, dropped behind it, and took careful aim. Despite his exhaustion, his fire was still devastatingly accurate.

All day he struggled forward. At dusk he reached the summit of a rim of hills, beyond which he had hoped to see the fort. But in the gathering twilight, if the fort was somewhere out there on the prairie, it was lost in murky shadow.

HIS head was swimming with exhaustion. He would have dropped where he was, unable to move, had it not been the down grade of the hill before him. Down this he staggered and rolled—and came to rest in a worn rut. Vaguely he recognized this as a wheel track. Almost instinctively he began to follow it, crawled a few feet, and collapsed.

Men from the fort, a few hundred feet away, found him here at dawn and carried him in. From the weak ravings of his delirium, they made out that an Indian siege was going on over toward Fort Kearney, and a relief force set out at once. A good number of the besieged were still alive, for the Indians had waited patiently for heat and thirst and sleeplessness to ease their bloody task.

Dennis Driscoll had come through in the glorious tradition of frontier heroism. He was delirious for one of the two weeks he spent recovering in the fort's hospital. He lived for many years thereafter and eventually died in 1906 in an Old Soldiers' Home in California.

SAVE WASTE PAPER!

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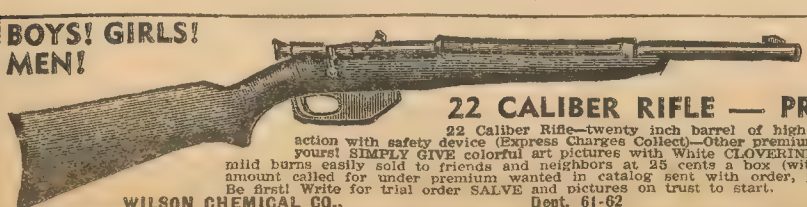

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Men of Snuffbox

(Continued from page 37)

her and she tried to twist away. And then I heard it. The sound of horses' hooves coming. And the son of a gun had ears as good as mine, for he heard it too.

He jerked a handkerchief out of his pocket and ran across to me. He thumbed my jaws apart, rammed that handkerchief clear down to my tonsils. Then he let loose of the rope over the beam and grabbed poor Sue. He took her into the other room.

The first one through the door was Juanita! Her being the lightest she'd got here first. She didn't even see me, lying in the shadows. And the second one was Luke Jones! Out of jail. Come to help his pal! Damn that Risueno, and here we'd both thought it was help coming. I tell you I laid very still, I didn't want them to see me.

AND out of the other room came the Mex's voice. *"Señor* Jones," he laughed, "I have Sue Dorgan as a shield. I'm walking out of here with a gun at her back. One move and I kill her. Back against the wall."

Now that didn't make no sense! Him and Jones was pals. Hadn't I seen them talking and planning? Maybe the Mex was fixing to cross his partner in crime. And I still laid still as a church mouse when the masked *bandido* emerged, holding poor Sue Dorgan as a shield, just like he'd said.

Juanita pat, *"Cabron!* I know you! My poor family, my mother!"

And the Mex laughed and he said, "Hello, pretty one. Perhaps I come back for you. Still, quiet, hold it!"

He paused at the door, his eyes mean over his mask. He said, "Tell the valiant men of Snuffbox that Digame Smith has—"

And that's as far as he got. A hand reached in and grabbed his wrist. The gun went off and the bullet buried itself not half an inch from my head. A fellow in his underwear came springing into the room. He and the *bandido* rolled over and over on the floor. It was over in a minute, but not the way you think. I figured the Jones fellow would spring in. But it was Juanita. She grabbed that red hot running iron. She cracked it over the *bandido's* head and would have burned him to death, by gosh, if Jones, laughing, hadn't pulled her away.

Well, sir, who comes a heaving in then but the judge, just in the nick of time. Juanita was reviving Sue Dorgan, the judge untied me, and we went out and got Tim Lee and began working on him.

Finally when everybody was revived I said, "Now you fellows, you can't do this to us Snuffboxers. Suppose you get to talking, Ranger?"

And the fellow we'd known as Jose Risueno grinned. He said, "I'm a Ranger, Mr. Stroud. This here is Digame Smith!" And he pointed to the fellow we'd called Luke Jones!

"You see," he went on, "I've been in Mexico for the last year or so and got acquainted with Digame Smith here. He's what you might call a retired *bandido.* He quit the business. I get this assignment and got in touch with him. It was easy to see that somebody had been using his name around these parts, so naturally he was interested. He came along to help me out."

Tim Lee got up. He went over and picked up Sue Dorgan and kissed hell out of her.

The real Ranger went on, "You fellows like to have blocked the deal when you slugged us both tonight and put us in jail. You see this guy stripped me, while I was unconscious. Then Juanita came and let us out—you see she'd just found out who was using Digame's name. She'd just found out who burned her, and killed her dad and mom. She—"

I WALKED over to where the fellow who was playing Digame was lying unconscious. I reached down and pulled the mask off his face and I felt pretty bad.

But finally I said, "Well, even if he did turn out bad, you can't rightly call him a Snuffboxer. His papa, old man Hobson, was a fine fellow. This here kid of his must have picked it all up when he was back east at school!"

Because the man who was playing the part of Digame Smith, the *bandido*, was our banker, Horace Hobson, damn him!

The judge, he said, "How did Juanita know?"

The real Ranger laughed. He said, "Hobson is sort of keen on the ladies. When he was burning little Juanita, he slipped. He kissed her. Seems according to Juanita every man kisses different. All she had to do was kiss enough fellers and she'd be bound eventually to find the masquerader."

I tell you I felt bad. I thought she'd kissed me because she liked me. And it was just for one purpose. Hell, she'd kissed them all, the judge, and the Ranger, and the ex-bandit, and then Horace Hobson. But what was this? Here she came, her eyes shining, her lips tremulous, her arms outstretched.

I said, "Darling! Darling!"

And she walked right by me to where the real Ranger was waiting. She kissed hell out of him.

Home and Dead on the Range

(Continued from page 75)

"Tell them, you devil dude lady!" commanded Sandra. "Tell 'em you hired my brother and Toro to rob the cabins! Tell 'em how you made them bring Trig Raymond here when he was unconscious, and how Dave Grant was shot! You took my dress to make it look right after my brother an' Toro killed each other in a gun ruckus! An' you put them jewels in Toro's belt under the dress!"

"Great Jehosiphat!" yelled old Hank Jeffers. "Trig?"

IT SEEMED it had just dawned upon the grizzled, old rodder that Trig Raymond was still swinging by the neck. But there was a sudden oath, a crashing of bodies and two men were on the ground. And one was none other than Trig Raymond himself, one hand gripping the throat of J. Grayson Faversham, and one fist hammering with ruthless assaulting and battering upon the beefy, red countenance of the Englishman. Faversham was bellowing, and his face was growing redder and a sight more pulpier under Trig's merciless punches.

For Trig had felt his wrists loosen as the horse had broken from under him. The appearance of Sandra seemed to give him superhuman strength and his hands had shot up and gripped the hanging rope. It was but a few feet to the cottonwood limb, and with the loop still around his throat, Trig overhanded his lean body to the thick branch.

He had been pulling the loop off his neck when Sandra's flying leap had smashed the dude lady's gun across her mouth. And at that, Trig saw Faversham make a snaking movement to get clear of the waddies. The Englishman was watching everyone furtively and his eyes were upon a saddle horse tied at the hitch rack.

Trig dived from the limb and his hard shoulders narrowly missed snapping Faversham's neck. And now he was still making more raw beefsteak of

the reddening face when old Hank Jeffers caught his arm and pulled him off.

"Gawda' mighty, Trig!" shouted old Hank. "What in all time are yuh tryin' tuh do? 'Pears as though yuh're jest cleared o' murder, an' yuh start honin' fer another'n!"

Trig's hand hooked into Faversham's collar and dragged him to his feet. Then he was ripping off Faversham's vest and shirt interrupting only to cross the Englishman's chin with his fist when he showed signs of resisting.

"I thought so!" gritted Trig, fingers hooked into a second money belt buckled around Faversham's waist. "An' I'm thinkin', Hank, yuh'll like as not find pore old Dave's twenty thousan' o' dinero in them belt pockets! Saw Faversham keep fuddling at his waist! Knew he had somethin' there that was worryin' him!"

OLD Hank was fingering wads of old bills when Sandra came flying into Trig's arms.

"Trig, honey!" she cried, lifting her bruised, scratched face and kissing him. "I heard them talkin' how they'd left you here and put the killin' on you! Then they shot each other, an' that she devil dude had left her clothes an' taken my dress! I heard my brother say before he was killed that the dude lady is a thief from the East, an' her name ain't Rona Morton, an' she ain't an heiress! An' this Faversham is her pardner, an' they go around framin' robberies!"

"Hush, honey," said Twig gently. "Reckon yuh're the bravest little critter this range has ever seen. Everything'll be all right now."

She was snuggled in his arms. She started to speak again—but Twig had better things for her mouth to do.

"That's all right, honey, I can tell you how this thriller ends—I always read PRIVATE DETECTIVE!"

Guns to Sling

(Continued from page 15)

lunch, coming back in the middle of the afternoon.

Charlie Goodmorning was worse than any of them. He was wearing a chief's head dress and a blanket round his bare shoulders, moccasins and beaded britches. He was riding barebacked, too, and just before Gila Pete fired off his nickel plated sixgun and ki-yi-ed a signal to get under way, Charlie Goodmorning lifted his blanket and winked at me and I saw he had that damned candid camera and knew somebody was going to be the subject of a screwy snapshot.

So they finally got off, and I fooled around talking to the Chinese cook, and pretty soon about eleven, Jerry Stone came back. He said, "Sheriff, you're plumb right. Those two snakes deserve to die but not by my hand. I decided to settle down here and do a bit of wooing if you can put me on." And that, of course, tickled me to death, me having took a liking to him.

I went to sleep right after chow and dreamed him and Bette was hooked up and a running the Beebox like it should be run, with all the dudes penned up in a corral and forty thousand head of longhorns ranging the pastures like they should have been.

Stone was a cowman. He had it written all over him. And I'd been right about Mexico, too, judging snap judgment by the way he wrapped and twisted his *cigarros*, instead of spitting on them like the rest of us did.

He'd been running blooded cattle in Chihuahua for eleven year and only come back to this country when he got word about his brother being ruined and his sister-in-law shooting herself.

About two o'clock they came back, as always, talking about how they'd roughed it, and all the dangers they'd come so bravely through. Always after their hardships they went swimming, usually the whole danged bunch. Jerry Stone, of course, kept out of sight, and being as he'd stayed in the dark the night before of course he was just a voice to Gwen and Wally. Nevertheless they was both more silent than usual, and kept eying everybody sort of quizzical like.

Wally, he decided to forego the water that afternoon, but he stood around watching the swimmers for a long time, waiting, it was easy to see, until Bette appeared in that garment she calls a bathing suit. And Bette? Hell, she sat on the edge of the bank laughing with him, and arolling her eyes up like a calf at his, and a preening herself for his edification just like a danged bird. It was sickening.

STONE was with me, watching from the bushes. He flipped his cigarette away and said bitterly. "And that guy calls hisself a man! I will bet you he has one of them marcella waves in his hair. And look at his fingernails a shining—and them feet! Lady's feet!" And sure enough, his feet was woman's size in a pair of huaraches he'd put on, flat and heelless.

Pretty soon they'd had enough, our swimming pool being the Yellow River dammed and coming right from the Matadors, it's pretty cold. So here came Ling to do his bit for the dudes, which meant a tray of glasses filled with little pink cocktails, and some stuff for Gwen. Everybody takes their drinks and chats and the group starts to break up, Wally and Bette moving away so close they rubbed when they walked by golly, and Gwen Parsons smiling coyly and shaking her finger at all the bankers and saying, "Now you boys mustn't follow, you mustn't peek! I trust you!"

For Gwen always took a sun bath in a little cleared place not too far from the pool, and she never failed to tell the "boys" she trusted them. I always figured she was scared somebody wouldn't

realize she was back there almost in her birthday clothes and wanted to make sure.

Ling would walk over to the sandy cleared place, maybe quarter mile away, holding aside some catclaw bushes to let her in. And she always took a big Turkish towel and spread right in the middle of that smooth white sand. And she'd have the morning paper with her, yesterday's city paper, as a matter of fact, but the morning paper to us, and a little French alarm clock that chimed out the *Mayonnaise* instead of ringing like a good American clock should ring. She'd unlax on her bel— on her stummick and let down the straps of her bathing suit, reading her paper and setting the alarm tinkler for nine minutes exactly. Then she'd turn on her side for six minutes, on her back for nine more and finally finish up with six minutes on the other side.

How did I know the exact schedule? Hell's bells, every man on the Beebox knew it!

WELL, sir, wanting Jerry Stone to know all there was to know about the Beebox, I took him in tow and cut through the mesquite and chaparral toward the place she was at. Jerry, he stood it okedoke for the first nine minutes, but when she turned, he got restless. He started backing out and danged near run over Yakima and Gila Pete, who had their usual places.

Before we got back, Powder River Curly came a running, cussing because he was late, what with having to do something or other. And Jerry said, "Good lord, it's sort of a free strip tease, ain't it. Where does the Indian sit?"

He meant it sarcastic, but he was handling the truth. I pointed out the cotton wood tree overhanging the sandy clearing. I said, "That there tree's Charlie Goodmorning's perch. Look close and you'll see him up there now."

Back at my shack he walked the floor for a minute, and then he said, "Sheriff, I know you won't believe it, on account of it happens in storybooks, but so help me I've fallen in love."

I knew he meant Bette. I nodded and said, "Me, I fell in love at first sight once, too—over in Dogtown it was, in 97. Widow woman name of Mulcahey."

But he didn't hear me. He stopped and glared at me, and he smacked his fist into his palm and said, "I won't have it, by gosh! That effeminate louse having the inside track. I'm going calling on Bette!"

And could I talk him out of it? Hell no. All I could do was follow along a few minutes later and get in on the tail end. They was in the patio, and Bette wasn't mad, not clear mad, anyway! She was facing him and grinning, and she said, "All right, Mr. Stone, maybe your intentions are good. It so happens that Mr. Masters has told me all about his checkered past, and I've told him it's the present that matters. So that's that."

He stood looking at her serious like, and choked out, "What if I could prove to you he didn't aim to marry you at all, that you was just another victim, even his crying being a put on?"

She grinned wider and shook her head. "If it could be proved!" She shrugged. "But it can't be, my friend. And now maybe you'll tell me why all the interest in my affairs?"

Jerry, he turned red, and he turned white, and he stuttered, and he couldn't say a word. And finally, in desperation, he reached for her, and she didn't dodge none too good and he kissed her, thorough like. Her cooperating a wee mite, it seemed to me. So he let her loose and turned around and beat it like the devil. By the time I got back to my shack an hour later he was out of sight. He'd left me a note. "Be back before long. By gosh, I'm not going to let a sweet girl like Bette get mixed up with those rats if I have to commit murder. J."

IT WAS the cook that found her. That Chinese must have gone for a little peek hisself, for all at once I never hear such a clatter, and when I come out, everybody was running toward the sandy

clearing where Gwendolyn took her public sunbath. I was late. The clearing was all messed up with dudes and mail order cowboys by the time I arrived. Somebody said, "Here's the sheriff," and they made way for me.

She was laying face up on her big towel, and she wouldn't ever roll over to brown the other side again. By golly, her face was serene and her eyes was open and she was smiling. But her left leg! Right up near her hip was the two little fang marks, and that leg was swollen twice its size, and all turned purple and black.

It was easy to see what had happened! She'd gone to sleep and a rattler had bit her and hell—what else could have happened?

There's people getting snake bit every day of the year in the West. Me, personally, I got it in the hand by a side winder once, and lived through it. Guess I've seen a full twenty cases. And if there was one thing I knew, here it was—that was the funniest case of snake-bite I ever saw. The clearing was messed up with the boots and shoes of a dozen or more people, but she was lying there so calm and serene that—well, people don't act that way when they get bit!

I'm no sheriff, except in name. But I managed to clear everybody out of there, even Bette, who'd gone off trying to comfort Wally. And I leaned over the corpse and found what I was looking for. A bump on the base of Gwen's skull. Now that made more sense—it proved the howcome of her not thrashing around after the rattler bit her. But it led me to this—how could whoever killed her—if any—get a rattler to bite her at the right minute?

Reckon a lot of you will blame me for what I did. Or what I didn't do. I got the boys together, and I said, "Boys, when we found Miss Gwen the clock said ten after five, didn't it? I figure a hell of a slug of venom would do her that way in an hour, which means the snake struck her about four, more or less. Where was the gallery at four o'clock?"

And every danged one of them had

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"GUNS DON'T WIN"

Will Nesbitt's dramatic novelette of the raw frontier, in the big

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quit watching poor Gwen sunbathe and was off doing something else. And not a one of them got what I was getting at, what with them being mail order cowboys. And knowing nothing about snakes and sandy soil.

So when the coroner from Carson County came out, and the undertaker, I never said a word. It was accidental snakebite as far as I knew. Why? Because I liked Jerry Stone. I couldn't figure him as killing Gwen on purpose, for revenge, and also to run Wally off, but a man in love does funny things.

What if Jerry had smacked her, what if he'd tossed him a rattler in there. On the other hand, what if this here Wally had done it hisself. And still on another hand, what if Bette had done it—to free Wally from auntie's domination?

DON'T reckon many of you ever tried to live with a murder locked up in your chest. I aged three or four years in the next week. One by one the dudes packed up and left—snake scared. Wally Masters told Bette he'd be back as soon as he got his auntie's estate settled, and went east with the body. Bette, she asked about Jerry Stone a couple of times, and wrote and canceled a lot of reservations and the first thing you know the Beebox was deserted except for us that was the crew and atmosphere.

Then the letter came. I didn't see it, but Bette told me about it. "You see," she said, crossing her pretty legs, "Wally's got an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of this business. Fifty thousand now would be a million in ten years."

I said, "You ain't got it, Bette."

She just shrugged and looked around with distaste and said, "This dude ranch! I hate fakes! I could raise that much on it by mortgaging."

And I snapped, "And you could take the same fifty thousand and put some stock on this cattle ranch, and quit being a phoney, and fooling with murderers!"

She shook her head, and I went on. "I know I'm too old to ramrod an outfit again. But there was that Stone, and—!"

"Stone!" A funny look came in her eyes. "Stone says he'll do things and doesn't do them." And she got up and walked in the house.

Wally Masters came back first, looking gigolo-ish and elegant as usual. He was full of this scheme of his, the one needing the fifty thousand, and it was sickening to see him making the progress he did. Then everything happened the same day. First of all, through Charlie Goodmorning.

ME, I take my baths in the river, usually early morning. At past sixty I got me a paunch, and my legs ain't as shapely as some. So I was right put out when I heard that Injun beller, and knew he'd snapped me in ankle deep water. Charlie's pictures wouldn't be so bad if he kept them to hisself, but he insists on showing them round.

Now I knew it wasn't no use to ask him for the film, or to try to buy it from him. So I waited until night, when he'd had a chance to develop it in his little darkroom over the stable. I framed up with Ling to keep Charlie busy, then busted into his darkroom. Among other things, I found a dozen good views of the dead Gwendolyn Parsons taking her sunbaths. Some front views, some rear views, some side views. Reckon I had in mind carrying off some of them to tack on my wall, to sort of keep me company on a cold night. But I only took one! Just one, and it was the most important picture that Charlie Goodmorning ever took!

Like I say, everything happened at once. Right after I ate, who comes down the road in his battered old Ford but Jerry Stone! And was he jubilant. He slapped me on the back, and he said, "I got him, Sheriff, I got him, by golly!" And when I asked him what he meant he said he could prove that Wally Masters hadn't had no intention of marrying Bette—before Gwen was killed, leastwise!

And I showed him that picture of

Gwen and did a little talking and we made our plans! We got Charlie and told him what he had to do. And next morning, about daylight, I was on my way to Carson City, in the next county, and was home before noon.

WELL, sir, when we walked in the living room of my ranch my heart sank. Because it looked like it was all over but the shouting. Bette and this here Wally was all wrapped up in each others arms and was a hugging and a kissing so thorough they didn't hear us till I cleared my throat.

And then he kept his arm around her shoulder! And Bette said, "Dad Lucas, I'm glad you came in. I want you to hear the news. Wally and I are riding into Carson tomorrow and getting married. I'm going to put the Beebox on the market and—"

I finished it for her. "And hand this crook fifty thousand dollars to go in business!"

She snapped, "Mr. Lucas!" Like Shanghai, her grandpa, would have done, and Wally Masters got to his feet then and shook his head sad like.

Before I could go on, Jerry Stone said softly, "You, Masters, three weeks ago I stood outside your window and started to shoot you!"

Masters hung his head and said softly, "A man's past always catches up with him," And he turned and took Bette's hand. "I told you about it, darling!"

Bette pulled him to her, and said, "Wally has told me all about his past. I've forgiven him. I—"

"I suppose he told you Miss Parsons was really Mrs. Masters?"

"He did!"

That was a lie, you could tell it, but that Bette was stubborn. And besides, Wally was crying crocodile tears and looking repentant like, which same always gets to a female woman.

"And that she suggested he'd never get anywhere with you unless he married you, which would have been hard to do —*as long as his wife was alive!*"

He damned quick quit crying then.

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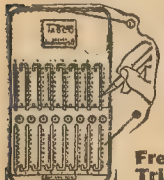

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He snapped, "What do you mean, sheriff?"

I said, "I mean your wife was snake bit all right, but she was murdered, just the same!"

And I unwrapped the package I had. It was an enlargement of the candid picture Charlie Goodmorning had taken of Gwen. She was flat on her back, and her left leg plainly revealed the two small pricks that showed where the rattler bit her.

I said, "There's your murdered wife, mister. Charlie Goodmorning crawled up in that tree and took that picture, not even knowing she was dead. The lens saw things his eye didn't see. I want you to notice several things, Bette, and you, Masters. Notice that clock. It read —five minutes after four! Notice the paper—you can even read the dateline, showing the picture was taken the day she was killed. And notice the footprints. Those wide flat ones are Ling's, where he spread the towel for her. These here are left by her clogs. And here's another set of flat ones, see?"

Wally Masters snapped, "Which proves what? Bette, do we have to listen to this old fool?"

"I think," said Bette gravely, "we better." She was beginning to understand. She went on, "And since the snake had already bitten her, where's its trail? A snake leaves a track on sand like that! Where is it?"

I NODDED and laughed, and Jerry laughed too. Bette sort of drew away from Wally. He was good, that man, good! He said in an awed voice, "But I still don't understand! How would a murderer?" And he whirled on Jerry Stone. "You! Damn you! You threatened us from outside the window that night! You caught a snake and tossed it—"

I said, "Snakebit people thrash around, my friend. Your wife didn't. On account of somebody hit her in the head first. Don't overlook those footsteps. The third set. Want me to tell you how it

was done? Well, sir, the killer killed him a rattler. He hit Gwen in the head with a club. Then he stuck the dead rattler's fangs in Gwen's leg and squeezed the poison glands. Simple, wasn't it?"

Nobody said a word, but you could have heard a feather drop. I took a snake skeleton from the package, and laid it on the table. I said, "I found it in the brush down by the river. See where its back has been busted in a couple of places?"

Real hoarse, Wally said, "You can find snake skeletons anywhere."

So I took the mesquite club out of the package and said, "This club was with the dead snake. There's some skin and some blonde hair in the end, from Gwen's head!"

Wally said, "Damn you, Stone, you'll swing for this!"

And I said, "Now wait, wait. See those footprints again? Notice they was flat, heelless. Stone was wearing boots, high heeled boots, like he's wearing now. I recall you was wearing huaraches, Masters, that leave a flat track like that."

He was good, plenty good. He managed to laugh. "Lots of people wear huaraches, my old friend."

"Now look at the paper," I said. I took it out and folded it the way it was in Charlie Goodmorning's picture. I took out a yardstick and measured it. It was sixteen inches, and a half, regular newsprint size.

I said, "Mr. Masters, we got the date and we got the time, and we all agree as to the means of murder. We got three sets of footprints, your wife's, Ling's, and those of Mr. X. Now, by checking carefully on this here blowed up picture, we find that if the newspaper is 16 and one half inches, by direct ratio the footprint of Mr. X is an exact eleven inches, and checking the showstore in Carson City I find that an eleven inch footstep means approximately a size six shoe. Who was wearing huaraches that small at that time on that day?"

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That got him! And by damn he wasn't so yellow. Where the gun came from I don't know but he grabbed Bette and pushed her in front of him, and covered us, snarling, "Wise guys! Know-it-alls! All right, I did it, but you'll never pin it on me, never! And don't try to stop me, or I'll let this fool woman have it!"

I said, "You go right ahead, mister. Hell, we don't give a damn when one rat kills another. All we wanted to do was keep you from marrying Bette. Go on, scram."

He thought it was a trap, of course. He backed to the door and opened it real slow, looking into the hall. At first he didn't see anything. Past them, I could see. I yelled, "Rattler!"

And sure enough, a big fat rattler had been coiled in the hall, and as he opened the door, Mr. Rattler came right on in toward him! He shoved on Bette and up-ended her, and he started blazing away at that snake. Soon as his gun was empty I stepped over and shoved my own Colt in his kidney!

I said, "I expected that, mister. Takes a snake to get a snake, don't it? That there rattler is dead, with a thread around his neck. Charlie tied him there after we came in. Here!"

He didn't even resist when I snapped handcuffs on his trembling wrists. I said, "Figured you'd confess, and you did, before three of us. I went to Carson City this morning and got myself deputized as a sure enough law man, so this arrest will stick. I'm taking you for the Mrs. Masters, alias Gwendolyn Parsons, murder. Coming, Jerry Stone?"

I might have known it. He was comforting Bette, and she was right up against his chest saying, "I thought you wasn't coming back!"

And all the way to Carson City with Masters I felt fine. I knew there'd be no more dudes on the Beebox, only cattle, and more cattle. That Stone, I'd knowed him for a cattle man the minute I laid eyes on him! Yes, sir!

The good old days were coming back!

The Toughest Hombre

By JOHN LATANE

THE Mountain Men were hardy men, beyond question. And certainly the hardiest of them all was Hugh Glass, who came through alive in one of the greatest tests of human fortitude in recorded history.

Glass was a member of an expedition led by Major Andrew Henry that, in the 1820's, went up into the Wyoming-Montana border country after furs. One day Glass and a companion were scouting ahead when they came upon a mother grizzly and her cubs. Glass instantly took a bead on her and fired.

The shot only wounded the huge animal and she charged. The two men lighted quick shucks, but Glass tripped and fell. Before he could regain his feet, the bear was upon him.

He managed to draw his pistol and sent another bullet into her, but then the monster struck it from his hand. He got his knife out and, as the bear dealt him terrible wounds with her fangs and eight-inch claws, he plunged it repeatedly into her side. His strokes were weakening and the world was turning black when the bear suddenly left him to rush to her cubs, which the companion was belaboring with his rifle butt in an effort to distract her attention.

Having successfully done so, the companion fled again. The bear had nearly reached him when, the knife and bullet wounds having finally taken effect, she fell over dead.

When the rest of the party came up, they found Glass almost lifeless. His legs, belly, and thighs were deeply gashed, and there was a gaping, bloody hole in his back. The expedition was without medical supplies of any kind, and all they could do was to wash out the wounds—and wait for Glass to die.

He lingered unconscious for several

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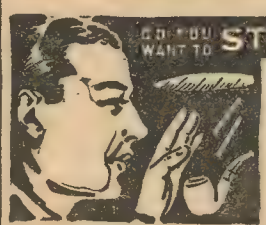

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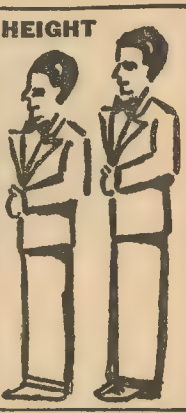

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days, showing only a slight spark of life. Finally, since he was obviously beyond hope, Major Henry offered a reward to two of the party to stay with the dying man until he was gone, and the others continued on.

The two watchers, Thomas Fitzgerald and eighteen-year-old Jim Bridger, stuck to their task for a couple of days. Then they decided that since Glass was practically dead, they might as well be on their way. So they gathered up all his possessions, overlooking an old razor, and rejoined the expedition, reporting that Glass was dead and that they had given him a decent burial.

But day or so after they had left him, Glass regained consciousness. He crawled down to a spring, drank deeply, ate a few buffalo berries, and lapsed back into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, his fever had subsided and his mind was clear. The closest settlement, he knew, was Fort Kiowa in the Dakotas, a hundred miles or so away. So, with never a thought of the odds against him, the insurmountable mountain-man started off to crawl there on his hands and knees—the wound in his back prevented his moving in any other way.

His average speed was two miles a day, from dawn to sunset. The territory was well supplied with berries and water, and Glass subsisted on this with the infrequent augmentation of small lizards. The wounds in his chest and abdomen and legs he could wash and care for, but he could not get at the deep gashes in his back. These soon filled with dirt and became badly infected. They also filled with maggots—and this, while agonizing as the maggots burrowed into his flesh, saved his life, for they devoured the putrefying flesh and prevented the infection from spreading.

But after a few days, he found his strength rapidly ebbing on the thin diet of berries and water. Midway through a morning, he slumped down, defeated. He was roused by sounds nearby: three wolves had chased a buffalo calf into the brush close to where he lay. The wolves brought the squalling animal down. He

waited until they had gorged themselves. When they lay down by the bloody carcass, Glass crept up to them. Their fierceness dulled by the feast, they arose, growled, and slunk off. The starving man fell on the remains and filled his belly. Then, cutting off with his razor as much meat as he could carry, he went onward with revived strength.

But after a number of days, when he had eaten the last of the buffalo meat and had been reduced once more to berries and lizards, his strength again failed. He crawled painfully on, growing more and more feeble, when up ahead he sighted the bare teepee poles of a deserted Indian village. Hope flared again within him—surely there would have been something left behind, a few handfuls of corn, a little dried buffalo meat. But when he had made his agonized way into the village he found it desolately and completely bare. All that remained were a few thin dogs who had refused to leave their accustomed haunts.

They were fierce and hungry, but not so much so that they dared approach this strange, crawling figure.

TWO days went by. The man was now familiar to the dogs. They began to approach more closely as he lay there, the open razor held in his teeth. Eventually, one thin beast came up to sniff tentatively at him. Instantly, Glass clutched a leg. His grasp was feeble, but before the animal could break away, the razor had done its work.

He feasted until he could hold no more, then slept. When he awoke, his strength had come again. Dragging the remains of the dog, he crawled on.

One glorious morning, he crawled up a hillock to see from the crest—Fort Kiowa! With his last ounce of strength, he made it up to the stockade. There the traders found him, a skeleton of a man, his hands bloody and twisted, his knees swollen pulps, his back an open, maggot-infested horror. Hugh Glass had gone through a nightmare of privation and torture that even a mountain man should never have come out of alive.

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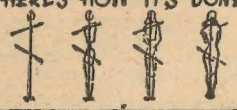

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